

CHERWELL DISTRICT
LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT

FOR

CHERWELL DISTRICT COUNCIL

BY

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
1 INTRODUCTION	1
• Background to the Study	1
• Approach and Methodology	2
2 THE CHERWELL LANDSCAPE	5
• Introduction	5
• Physical Influences	5
• Human Influences	7
• Landscape Features	10
• Variations in Landscape Character	14
3 THE LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREAS	19
• Introduction	19
• Upper Cherwell Basin	19
• Cherwell Valley	20
• Lower Cherwell Floodplain	23
• Ironstone Hills and Valleys	25
• Incised Ironstone Plateau	27
• Upper Heyford Plateau	29
• Oxfordshire Estate Farmlands	30
• Otmoor Lowlands	32
4 EVALUATION AND GUIDELINES	36
• Introduction	36
• Conservation Landscapes	37
• Repair Landscapes	38
• Restoration Landscapes	39
• Reconstruction Landscapes	40

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: References

APPENDIX 2: Description of landscape types

FIGURES

- Figure 1:** The Study Area
- Figure 2:** Simplified Geology
- Figure 3:** Landform and Drainage
- Figure 4:** Landscape Features
- Figure 5:** Landscape Character Areas
- Figure 6:** Landscape Types
- Figure 7:** Upper Cherwell Basin
- Figure 8:** Cherwell Valley
- Figure 9:** Lower Cherwell Floodplain
- Figure 10:** Ironstone Hills and Valleys
- Figure 11:** Incised Ironstone Plateau
- Figure 12:** Upper Heyford
- Figure 13:** Oxfordshire Estate Farmlands
- Figure 14:** Otmoor Lowlands
- Figure 15:** Enhancement Strategy

PHOTOGRAPHIC SHEETS

- No. 1: Landscape Features
- No. 2: Landscape Character Areas-1
- No. 3: Landscape Character Areas-2
- No. 4: Landscape Types (R1a-R3a)
- No. 5: Landscape Types 2 (R4a-R6b)
- No. 6: Landscape Types 3 (T1-T5)

- the Upper Cherwell Basin
- the Cherwell Valley
- the Lower Cherwell Floodplain
- the Ironstone Hills and Valleys
- the Ironstone Incised Plateau
- the Upper Heyford Plateau
- the Oxfordshire Estate Farmlands
- the Otmoor Lowlands

- 2.52 Figure 5 shows the extent of these areas and the main distinctions between them are indicated below. A more detailed description of the character of each area is given in the following chapter.
- 2.53 The River Cherwell forms a continuous landscape 'thread' through the district from north to south and its valley is a recognisable landscape unit. However, its character is not consistent and varies quite markedly according to the scale and shape of the valley form and the patterns of land use within it. It has therefore been divided into three discrete sections, with their own individual identity. The **Upper Cherwell Basin** is a relatively high area of land with very open, gently sloping valley sides. Further south the river runs within the more tightly enclosed **Cherwell Valley**, while at the south of the district the river valley opens out into the **Lower Cherwell Floodplain**, as the Cherwell joins the River Ray and River Thames. The balance of arable and pastoral farmland and the extent of the influence of urban development are also key distinguishing elements between these areas.
- 2.54 Similarly, the ironstone region in the north-west of the district is distinguished and unified by its common geology and 'upland' character. However, differences in the complexity of landform and associated land use have led to the division of this area into two main areas: the **Ironstone Hills and Valleys** and the **Incised Ironstone Plateau**. The Ironstone Hills and Valleys display a complex topography, being cut and folded into numerous steep-sided valleys which have a pattern of small pastoral fields on the steepest slopes and more open arable farming on rolling higher ground. The Incised Plateau is a more unified area of upland which is sharply divided by the Sor Brook and its tributaries. The area is characterised by open arable farming, with large areas of rough upland pasture.
- 2.55 The **Upper Heyford Plateau** lies to the east of the Cherwell Valley and forms a distinctive landform unit of elevated ground which dips gently away to the south-east and falls more steeply to the west into the Cherwell Valley. It is situated on the highest part of the oolitic limestone belt and is characterised by extensive areas of rolling arable land with a distinctively denuded character. The disused airbase of Upper Heyford is a dominant element within the landscape of this area.

- 2.56 The **Oxfordshire Estate Farmlands** are also situated on the limestone belt but, unlike the Upper Heyford Plateau, the area is characterised by a more rolling landform. Most distinctive, however, is the pattern of woodlands and mixed farmland, much of which is associated with estates linked to the extensive areas of remaining eighteenth century parkland. The band of parklands continues northwards into Northamptonshire, and is part of a larger regional pattern.
- 2.57 At the south of the district is the distinctive, low lying area associated with the River Ray flood plain which forms the large character area of the **Otmoor Lowlands**. This flat, open farmland has a distinctive atmosphere, particularly where the traditional wet meadows and pastures and their important flora and fauna persist. Elsewhere, drainage improvements have led to the conversion of pasture to arable, and the landscape has a denuded, lowland character. A number of isolated low hills dominate the skyline, and the south of the area is contained by the low ridges of the Oxford Heights. Military development has had a considerable influence upon settlement and land use within the area.

Landscape Types

- 2.58 Although Landscape Character Areas have a definable context and recognisable identity, they inevitably include a fairly diverse range of local landscapes. These have been divided into a series of generic landscape types, reflecting the most distinctive combinations of landform and landcover characteristics and the main determinants of local landscape character across the district. A total of seven main types was identified with further detailed variations identified as sub-types. A summary of their key characteristics is given below and their distribution within the district is illustrated on Figure 6. Appendix 2 contains details and descriptions of these types and sub-types.
- 2.59 Sometimes the divisions between these types may be distinct, for example between an area of wooded parkland divided from the surrounding arable farmland by a clear boundary. More frequently, there is a more gradual transition between areas of different character, for example where hedgerows change from well managed, dense lines to weaker features that are being replaced by fences, or where the influence of urban development increases to such an extent that rural character is overwhelmed. In these cases, the boundaries between types are only an approximation of a change in character.
- 2.60 The first main distinction can be made between those landscapes which are essentially **rural** in character and those which have been influenced by urban development and have a somewhat degraded or **transitional** character. The Cherwell landscape is predominantly agricultural and therefore retains a rural character but pockets of transitional landscape occur within this rural fabric (eg. airfields and quarries) or around the fringes of the main settlements and transport corridors.

been mentioned earlier in this report but it is worth noting that a particularly good example is found at Shenington. Here, the steep slopes are terraced to maximise the cultivation area and these strip lynchets are clearly visible.

- 3.55 The attractive village of Wroxton contains many seventeenth and eighteenth century thatched cottages but is best known for Wroxton Abbey. Part of the thirteenth century Augustinian monastic house is incorporated into the present seventeenth century house and the foundations of the early church have been uncovered. The park, designed by Sanderson-Miller, contains the remains of formal gardens and pleasure grounds which included a lake with a great cascade, a dovecote and an archway at the end of an eastward view towards Drayton.

UPPER HEYFORD PLATEAU

- 3.57 The Upper Heyford Plateau lies immediately to the east of the Cherwell Valley, on the highest rise of the White Limestone. A lower area than the Ironstone Hills, it is nonetheless an exposed, level, open plateau, which dips very gently into rolling hills to the south-east. Upper Heyford Airbase comprises about a third of this character area and dominates the landscape.

Landform and landcover

- 3.58 This area lies on a band of White Limestone, a limestone which contains a high proportion of mica interbedded with grey marl. It rises north-westwards in gentle undulations from 120m to 140m. To the west, the land falls sharply away into the valley of the River Cherwell. Minor streams drain west and south into the Thames river system via the Rivers Cherwell and Ray. However, streams sourced around Fritwell and Ardley drain into Padbury Brook which flows eastwards into the Great Ouse.
- 3.59 The level, open aspect was used to great advantage as a military airbase which now dominates the landscape. Immediately around the airfield are a number of grazing fields. However, agricultural land is almost all in intensive arable cultivation, with level or gently rolling, large open fields. Smaller, enclosed grazing fields cluster close to the villages.

Variation in landscape character

- 3.60 The southernmost part of this character area is dominated by **elevated flat arable farmland with weak structure (R1a)**. There are few hedges and virtually no trees. The land is relatively high, and from the well defined western edge there are good views across the Cherwell Valley.
- 3.61 The northern part of the area is similar in character to the south, except that as the land rises, the topography becomes more rolling. The landform gives some interest to the **rolling arable landscape with weak field**

Figure 12

UPPER HEYFORD



SCALE 1:100,000

pattern (R2a), although fields of arable land tend to run into one another with no visual or physical interruption. Within this large-scale landscape are the steeper slopes associated with village settlement, where smaller fields and mixed farming are local features.

- 3.62 The **Airfield (T4)** at Upper Heyford dominates the whole of this character area. On the plateau top are the runways, with associated landing lights and security fences, while barracks, offices, warehouses and hangars sprawl across the landscape to the south. Both buildings and airfield are surrounded by high wire security fences.
- 3.63 The base is now disused and deserted, but features such as the water towers are still very visible across the Cherwell valley. Associated street lighting and security lighting is particularly visible over long distances at night.

Special features

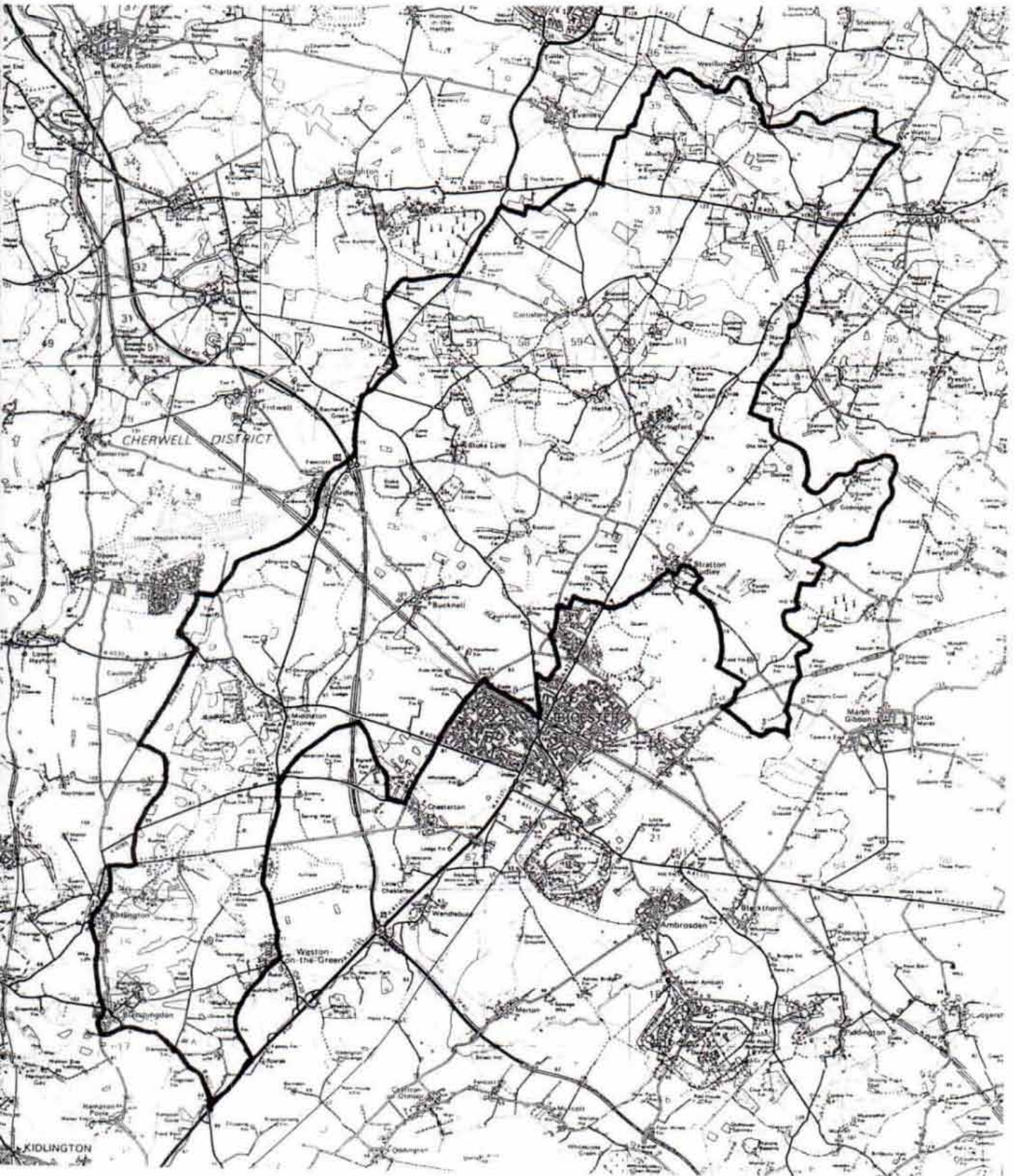
- 3.64 This sparse area of high ground is crossed by two ancient parallel routeways. The line of the Portway is followed by the minor road from Kirtlington which runs along the edge of the Cherwell Valley to Upper Heyford and continues northwards as a footpath towards Souldern. The other more visible feature is variously known as Aves Ditch, Ash Bank and Wattle Bank. It is most obvious as a ditch and bank running across the countryside between Middleton Stoney and Caulcott, and its line can be traced considerably further south, although much of it has been levelled. The bank had a dual function as a Roman boundary dyke and as an embanked road and has formed estate and parish boundaries since Saxon times.
- 3.65 An SSSI falling into this character areas is associated with a more recent linear feature, the railway cutting at Ardley. Here a herb-rich limestone grassland sward has developed on the steep banks of the railway cutting, where the wide range of typical species includes bee orchid *Ophrys apifera*, green-winged orchid *Orchis morio* and blue fleabane *Erigeron acer*. The cutting has particularly large populations of butterfly species which are uncommon in Oxfordshire, supporting a large colony of Small Blue, Brown Argus, Dark Green Fritillary, Green Hairstreak and Duke of Burgundy butterflies, as well as the nationally uncommon Wood White butterfly.

OXFORDSHIRE ESTATE FARMLANDS

- 3.67 South east of the Upper Heyford Plateau, the limestone dips into a series of gentle undulations. This area runs from Bletchingdon on the edge of the Cherwell Valley in the south, around to the north of Bicester and up to the county boundary with Northamptonshire. It is characterised primarily by the extensive remains of eighteenth century parklands and estate farmland

Figure 13

OXFORDSHIRE ESTATE FARMLANDS



SCALE 1:100,000

which lies in a band across Oxfordshire and continues into Northamptonshire, which was favoured by the gentry since it was within easy travelling distance from London.

Landform and landcover

- 3.68 This character area is situated upon White Limestone and Cornbrash, a bluish-grey limestone which contains shell debris and has a high clay content. Both bands trend south-west to north-eastwards, rising up to about 120m in the north in a series of gentle undulations.
- 3.69 A major watershed divides the area on an east-west alignment. Streams rising around Stratton Audley and Bucknell drain southwards into the River Ray and hence the Thames river system, while streams to the north of Fringford and Stoke Lyne join Padbury Brook and the Great Ouse river system, flowing eastwards to drain into the Wash.
- 3.70 This area is noticeably the better wooded than the rest of Cherwell District, with considerable plantations which are associated with extensive areas of parkland. Much of the land is in arable cultivation where the wooded character persists, with woodlands which divide and enclose the landscape on a large scale, there are also long views across rolling open fields where there are substantial breaks in tree cover.
- 3.71 Particularly towards the north of the area, woodland cover decreases and the countryside opens out. This is a typical English landscape scene of gently rolling hills clothed with a patchwork of fields punctuated by hedgerow trees and copses. In some areas this is disappearing, resulting in a more open landscape where only lines of trees remain to mark a previous field boundary.

Variations in landscape character

- 3.72 Six distinct areas of **18th Century enclosed farmland (R6a)** survive within this character area, at Bletchington, Kirtlington, Middleton, Bignell, Tusmore and Shelswell. Many of them are still surrounded by their original limestone walls, containing a pastoral scene with scattered trees and small woods. The parklands incorporate many fine specimens of single trees, notably beech, oak and horse chestnut. However, in some areas the grazing land has been ploughed up, although often trees have been retained in game coverts.
- 3.73 Associated with these parklands, but not contained within the parkland walls, are areas of **estate farmlands (R6b)** which display estate farm characteristics such as metal railings, post and rail fences, and regular patterns of roadside avenue trees.
- 3.73 **Large scale arable farmland enclosed by woods and copses (R3a)** is found across this character area, where the landscape is structured on a

large scale by woodland belts. The fields tend to be large and open, without any boundary. Plantations are located in long strips along watercourses, roads or other natural boundaries.

- 3.74 To the north of Bicester the landscape opens out into a **rolling arable landscape with strong field pattern copses and trees (R2b)**. The patchwork of arable and pasture is given definition by well maintained hedges. Many of the hedges contain regularly spaced mature hedgerow oaks, some of which are in excellent health although substantial numbers are beginning to die back. Road verges are generous widths, and often have a ditch and hedge on either side.
- 3.75 Views over the rolling countryside are punctuated by numerous small copses and coverts, a well maintained asset in an area where hunting and shooting are still regular features of rural life. However, in places the structure of the landscape is disappearing as intensive arable use has resulted in the removal of field boundaries so that only lines of hedgerow trees remain.

Special features

- 3.76 The most notable features of interest within this character area are the eighteenth century parklands. Several of those remaining, including Middleton Stoney and Kirtlington, have had more than one major phase of landscaping. The first phase of the layout of the eighteenth century park at Middleton was an avenue which ran through the small medieval deer park, which had originally been enclosed early in the thirteenth century. The extension to the layout continued into the nineteenth century, when the old manor house and a number of cottages were destroyed as part of the landscape scheme. The estate villages are found at Bletchingdon and Kirtlington, which likewise have a unity of design and detail, and a planned layout around village greens.
- 3.77 Kirtlington was originally planned to be in the formal style, but was finally landscaped by Capability Brown between 1751 and 1762. The park was considerably extended to cover an area of over 200 ha, including the site of a disused medieval hunting park. The belts of Scots Pine and the loosely grouped coppices around the park were to become hallmarks of Brown's later work. He is also known to have worked at Middleton Stoney and Kirtlington and considerably influenced the park at Bletchingdon [16, 18].

OTMOOR LOWLANDS

- 3.79 At the south east of the district is another large character area, the Otmoor Lowlands. This is essentially a flat, wet, low lying landscape, but it displays considerable variation owing to particular landform features and built development. It stretches northwards to include Bicester's urban fringes, and to the south includes the edge of the Oxford Heights.

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREAS



Upper Cherwell Basin Landscape Character Area



Cherwell Valley Landscape Character Area



Lower Cherwell Floodplain Landscape Character Area



Ironstone Hills and Valleys Landscape Character Area



Incised Ironstone Plateau Landscape Character Area



Upper Heyford Plateau Landscape Character Area

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREAS



**Oxfordshire Estate Farmlands
Landscape Character Area**



**Otmoor Lowlands Landscape
Character Area**