



Chapter 1: Introduction

It came to pass that the Queen decided to register her land, each unit according to its past and its present usage and so she went about her land with her civil servants and she recorded the land and all the things that she could see and all the things that she could discover about her land, and she divided the land into polygons, each according to its kind

From 'The Legend of Polygonia' by Dr Romola Parish, Poet in Residence.

This chapter introduces the Oxfordshire Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC) project. Firstly, it sets out what HLC is, its guiding principles and its evolution in the United Kingdom over the past 23 years. It then goes on to describe the Oxfordshire project: its aims and objectives, project team and development, and the geological and environmental character of the study area. The chapter concludes with a summary of how to use the Oxfordshire HLC (more detailed information can be found in Chapter 7: Dissemination), copyrights and a disclaimer.

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1.1 Historic Landscape Characterisation

Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC) recognises that to better plan for the future an understanding of the past is required. HLC was, therefore, designed to provide evidence of the time-depth within a landscape to inform our understanding of an area's sensitivity, vulnerability and capacity for change.¹ At its core it is a tool for managing change. However, it is also a tool for exploring the past. Thus, HLC not only has applications within planning and landscape and heritage management, but also in individual, communal, and academic research.

Integral to the development of the concept of HLC is the definition of *landscape* set out by the European Landscape Convention:

“an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and / or human factors”.²

HLC maps the landscape with reference to its historic development and character, creating a map-based tool and linked database.

1.2 Development and Guiding Principles of HLC

In 1990, the Government's white paper, 'This Common Inheritance', asked English Heritage to assess whether a list of historically important landscapes, akin to that used for buildings and monuments, was desirable. In response, English Heritage advised that comprehensive characterisation of all landscape was preferable.³ Instead of creating a national register of 'special' landscapes, it was deemed better to assess the historic character of the whole landscape as all landscapes have an historic dimension.⁴

As part of this review a pilot HLC project was conducted in Cornwall between 1993 and 1994. This pilot study sought to address a perceived failing of existing Archaeological Resource Management and to develop a methodology which moved management away from the point-based system of Historic Environment Records (HERs)⁵ and Sites and Monuments Records which could not be expanded to consider whole landscapes.⁶

The Cornish pilot established a set of principles by which future HLC projects have been guided:⁷

- **Present not past.** The present day landscape is the object of study.

¹ Clark, J., Darlington, J. & Fairclough, G. 2004. Using Historic Landscape Characterisation. English Heritage's review of HLC Applications 2002-03. English Heritage & Lancashire County Council. pp. 1-3.

² European Landscape Convention, Council of Europe, Florence, October 2000.

³ Aldred, O, and Fairclough, G. 2003. Historic Landscape Characterisation: taking stock of the method. English Heritage/Somerset County Council, London. p5.

⁴ Fairclough, G., Lambrick, G. & McNab, A. 1999. Yesterday's World, Tomorrow's Landscape: the English Heritage Historic Landscape Project 1992-1994.

⁵ HERs, typically a database and linked digital mapping system, contain details of known archaeological sites and finds and historic buildings. They are a regularly updated resource usually managed by local authorities. For more information about HERs, see Historic England's [page on the subject](#).

⁶ Aldred, O. & Fairclough, G. 2003. p1.

⁷ Clark et al., 2004. p6; Herring, P. 1998. Cornwall's Historic Landscape – Presenting a method of historic landscape character assessment. Cornwall Archaeology Unit and English Heritage, Cornwall County Council, Truro. pp. 11-13.



- **Landscape not sites.** HLC is concerned with areas, not discrete sites or points.
- **All aspects of the landscape.** HLC does not focus on 'special' areas or monuments, but considers the common and the modern too.
- **Human landscape – biodiversity is a cultural phenomenon.** Semi-natural features have an equally important impact on landscape character as archaeological features.
- **Interpretation not record, perception not facts.** Landscape is perceived by people, it is inherently subjective.
- **Management of change, not preservation.** Landscapes are and should be dynamic.
- **Transparency.** The processes by which the HLC was created should be clearly articulated and communicated.
- **Jargon free and easily accessible.** Reports and maps to be accessible and easy to read by all.
- **Integration.** The results of HLC should be incorporated into existing heritage management records, such as the HER.

1.3 The Oxfordshire HLC Project

The Oxfordshire HLC project commenced in October 2012, funded by Historic England and hosted by Oxfordshire County Council (OCC). Due to a change in key personnel, the project was not brought to a close until July 2017. The Oxfordshire HLC represents the final project completed (outside of London) within Historic England's national programme of supporting counties and other local planning authorities prepare HLCs.

1.3.1 Aims and Objectives⁸

The aims of the Oxfordshire HLC were:

To characterise, digitally map and make available in a web-based format, the historic dimension of the current landscape of Oxfordshire, in order to inform its management, conservation, and understanding at a local, county, regional, and national level.

Within these aims, the following objectives were identified:

- To improve and foster understanding of historic landscape character within Oxfordshire.
- To enhance awareness of local distinctiveness.
- To encourage HLC as a resource for sustainable management and facilitation of appropriate change.
- To provide a landscape context for archaeological sites within the Oxfordshire HER.
- To provide baseline data for monitoring subsequent change to the historic environment.
- To support OCC's role in strategic planning in respect of historic environment issues.
- To underpin historic environment advice given to District Councils within Oxfordshire.
- To widen understanding, within and beyond OCC and the planning authorities advised, of what the historic environment consists of.
- To assist development of partnership with other agencies.
- To foster links with other disciplines/datasets, such as Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) and Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Survey (OWLS).

⁸ Oxfordshire County Council Historic and Natural Environment Team. Historic Landscape Characterisation Project Design. February 2012. Pp. 13-16. A copy of the Project Design can be found in the online Project Archive.



- To encourage integrated working with other environment/conservation agencies, such as Natural England, the Environment Agency, and the Forestry Commission.
- To provide a framework for subsequent characterisation projects.
- To ensure a level of compatibility with HLCs from adjacent counties in preparation of the development of regional HLC models.

This HLC project will incorporate the results of the two current Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) HLC projects that fall within Oxfordshire – North Wessex Downs and the Chilterns – and the HLC for Oxford City, and will revisit and update the area originally covered by the Cotswold AONB HLC project.

It will be a valuable resource for increasing our understanding and appreciation of the historic landscape across the community and in all aspects of planning and land management. It is intended that the results of this project will be used in conjunction with Natural England/OWLS. The project will strengthen the evidence bases available to planning staff in the County and District Authorities, and will influence Local Development Frameworks. The project will enable the eventual integration of historic and natural environment datasets to create a more holistic landscape character assessment for the county.

Specific uses are likely to include:

- It will support existing policies in Local Development Frameworks and help to strengthen future policies in the new Local Plans, including any spatial or area-based policies or supplementary evidence bases.
- It will, when integrated with HLC undertaken in adjacent areas, provide a context for developing cross-boundary initiatives where appropriate.
- It will provide additional baseline information for landscape strategies and landscape assessments.
- It will provide baseline information for local environmental strategies, including Neighbourhood Plans, Conservation Area Appraisals, Parish Plans and Village Design Statements or environmental initiatives, including Historic Environment Action Plans (HEAPs).
- It will provide a context for advice given to Natural England in terms of targeting priorities for joint character areas and for advice given in respect of Environmental Stewardship.
- It will help provide material that can be used in the assessment of landscape capacity and sensitivity to urban development or other forces for change.
- It will provide a context for the management of land in public ownership.
- It will provide a fundamental, holistic, and meaningful landscape layer against which to interrogate other layers within the County HER.
- It will provide a dataset which will provide additional context for other County-wide GIS datasets, such as biological and geological records, and landscape-scale conservation initiatives.
- It will improve information available on Historic Parks and Gardens, to complement the national database.
- It will provide a context and stimulus for possible future research, for example on characterisation of vernacular buildings.
- It will provide a publically accessible dataset for use by individuals or groups engaged in research on Oxfordshire's historic landscapes.



1.3.2 Project Development and Team

The Oxfordshire HLC project was carried out by the Archaeology Team within Oxfordshire County Council. The project was conducted by the HLC Officer(s), Charlotte Malone (2012-2015) and Dr Abi Tompkins (2016-2017). Support was provided by the Historic Environment Record Officer, Susan Lisk, and a Project Assurance Officer, Peter Herring, from Historic England. Further guidance was given by the wider Archaeological Team, Hugh Coddington and Richard Oram.

The project commenced in October 2012 and was completed in July 2017.

The Oxfordshire HLC was commissioned in line with other HLC projects and funded by Historic England.

During the initial stages of the project a Stakeholder Group was identified to guide the development of the dataset and final products. The group comprised representatives from:

- Historic England
- Oxfordshire County Council
- Cotswolds AONB
- Chilterns AONB
- North Wessex Downs AONB
- Oxford City Council
- Cherwell District Council
- South Oxfordshire District Council
- Vale of the White Horse District Council
- West Oxfordshire District Council
- Wiltshire Council
- West Berkshire Council
- Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre

Stakeholder Group Meetings were held regularly throughout the duration of the project and presentations and/or minutes from these meetings can be found in the project archive, available [here](#).

1.3.3 Study Area

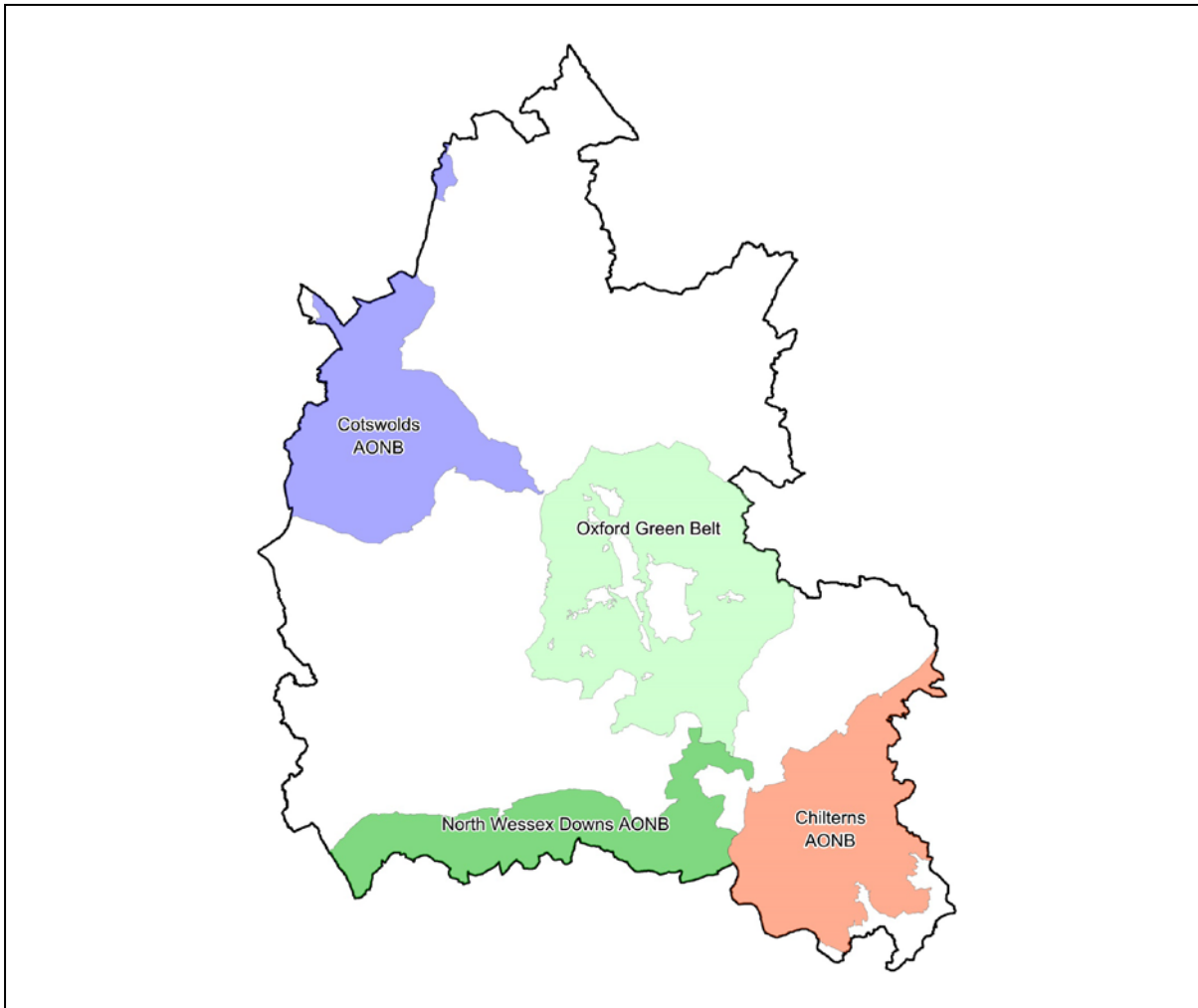
1.3.3.1 Size and Population

The area covered by this HLC project covers the modern county of Oxfordshire, as of the 1974 administrative boundary changes, and consists of 321 civil parishes and five District Councils: Cherwell, Oxford City, South Oxfordshire, the Vale of the White Horse, and West Oxfordshire. The county covers an area of approximately 260, 493 hectares and at the time of the 2011 Census had a population of 653,800.⁹ The county comprises one city, Oxford, and various towns, such as Banbury, Chipping Norton, and Didcot. Despite these urban centres, as of mid-2015, one third of the total population lived in areas defined as rural by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). In the South East of England, Oxfordshire is the second least densely populated county, with 2.6 people per hectare compared with 4.7 people per hectare across the wider region.

⁹ The ONS Mid-Year Estimates recorded that as of mid-2015 the population had grown to 677,800.



Oxfordshire has a varied landscape, of which 26% lies within three AONBs and 13.6% makes up the Oxford Green Belt. Although not a landscape designation in itself, the Green Belt was established primarily to protect the character of Oxford and its landscape setting and to prevent urban sprawl. Seven Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), 111 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and 362 Local Wildlife Site have also been identified.¹⁰



1.3.3.2 Geology and Topography¹¹

The underlying geology of Oxfordshire comprises a series of formations which lie on a broadly northeast to southwest axis. These range from the Jurassic limestones and sandstones in the north of the county to the Cretaceous chalks in the southeast. Large parts of the county are overlain by Pleistocene deposits, in particular, clay-with-flints, glacial gravels, and alluvial deposits.

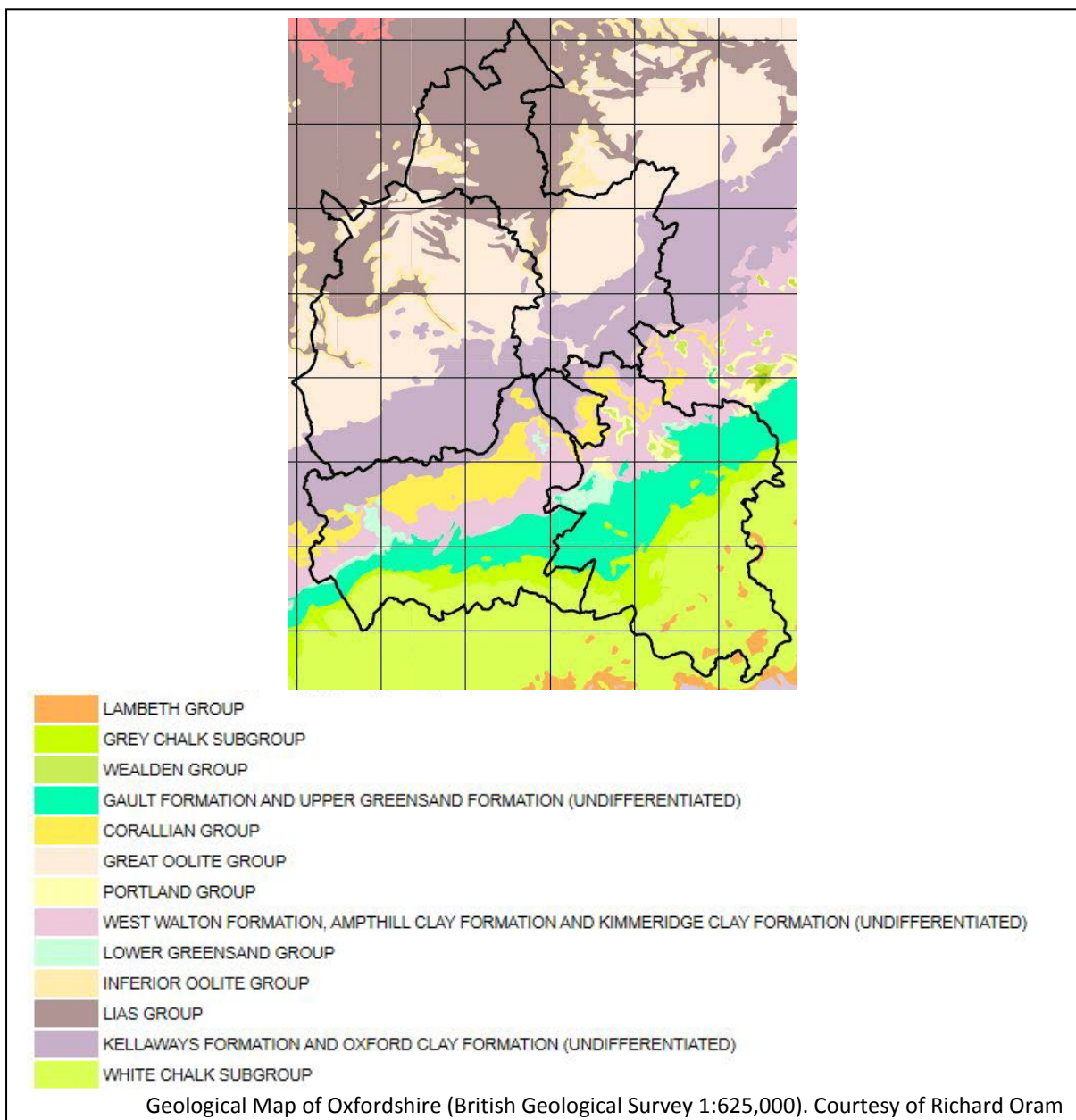
Five main geological zones are evident:

¹⁰ Oxfordshire County Council Historic and Natural Environment Team. Historic Landscape Characterisation Project Design. February 2012. p. 4; Wild Oxfordshire. 2017. The State of Nature in Oxfordshire 2017. Full Report. pp. 9-13.

¹¹ Oxfordshire County Council Historic and Natural Environment Team. Historic Landscape Characterisation Project Design. February 2012. Pp. 5-6



- **The Cotswolds.** The northern and north-western part of Oxfordshire is underlain by Oolitic Limestones of the Jurassic period, interbedded with sandstones, clays, and Cornbrash forming an upland area. The Oolitic overburden has been stripped away in the upper reaches of the Evenlode and Cherwell valleys to form lowlands based on Lias clays.
- **Vale of Oxford.** Dipping gently south-eastwards, the Lower Oolitic series of the Cotswolds disappears beneath the Oxford Clay in a zone of clay vales with numerous streams and gentle slopes.
- **The Oxford Heights.** A second zone of higher ground based on limestones, calcareous grits and clays of the Corallian series.
- **The Gault Clay Vale.** South and east again, the Corallian strata disappear beneath the Gault Clay. Together with the succeeding strata of Marlstone and Upper Greensand, this forms a low-lying area of clay vales with a gentle terrain and frequently impeded drainage.
- **The Chilterns.** Cretaceous chalk forms the basis of a landscape of steep slopes, thin soils, and dry valleys which dissect a plateau of chalk capped by later deposits of plateau drift and clay-with-flints.





1.3.3.3 Landscape Character

Historic Landscape Characterisation is one approach to landscape, emphasising the historic dimension, but there are other widely used approaches, including Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) whose emphases are on the rural, and especially its visually appreciated aspects, on land cover and topography, but which also recognises the cultural and draws on HLC as one of its sources for this. Much LCA work is done at the county or more local level but there has also been one England-wide characterisation, undertaken in the 1990s jointly by English Nature, English Heritage and the Countryside Commission, which defined 159 Joint Character Areas, renamed more recently as National Character Areas (NCAs). Seven NCAs fall within Oxfordshire: Berkshire and Marlborough Downs, Chilterns, Cotswolds, Midvale Ridge, Northamptonshire Uplands, Northamptonshire Vales, and the Upper Thames Clay Vale.¹²

Berkshire and Marlborough Downs

Vast arable fields stretch across the sparsely settled, rolling chalk hills of the Berkshire and Marlborough Downs National Character Area (NCA). There are extensive views from the escarpment in particular, punctuated by landmarks including chalk-cut horse figures, beech clumps and ancient monuments. Historic routeways, including the Ridgeway National Trail, provide public access across this landscape. There are numerous Scheduled Monuments and heritage features across this landscape. These are at risk from damage by cultivation and animal burrowing. The natural beauty and special scenic qualities of the area lead to the majority of the area (97%) being included in the North Wessex Downs AONB.

Farmland habitat supports brown hare, harvest mouse, rare arable plants and farmland birds, including stone curlew. Along the escarpment and steep slopes, limited tracts of hanging woodlands and species-rich chalk grassland can be found. Open access downland offers the public the opportunity to see species such as the skylark and Adonis blue butterfly. At Hackpen, Warren and Gramp's Hill Downs Site of Specific Scientific Interest (SSSI) early gentian can be found.

In the valleys, woodlands are found on steep slopes, and settlements cluster along the valley bottoms. Watercourses in the Downs are chalk fed by groundwater in the chalk aquifer. The rivers and aquifer are affected by abstraction and pollution. Meadow and pasture in the valleys combine with arable farming and small woods to create a mixed agricultural landscape, defined by hedgerow boundaries.

Chilterns

The extensively wooded and farmed Chilterns landscape is underlain by chalk bedrock that rises up from the London Basin to form a north-west facing escarpment offering long views over the adjacent vales. From the vales, the River Thames breaches the escarpment in the south at the Goring Gap and flows on past riverside towns such as Henley. Small streams flow on chalk down some of the dip slope valleys or from the scarp foot, passing through numerous settlements. The major sources of public water supply for the Chilterns and the London area are the chalk aquifer and the Thames.

The countryside is a patchwork of mixed agriculture with woodland, set within hedged boundaries. Furthest from London, the natural and built features of the countryside are recognised as special

¹² National Character Area Profiles published by Natural England, 2014.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-character-area-profiles-data-for-local-decision-making/national-character-area-profiles>



and attractive in approximately half the NCA by the designation of the Chilterns AONB and, in a small area south of the River Thames, by the North Wessex Downs AONB. Outside the AONBs there are major settlements that incorporate extensive urban fringe and growth areas, including Henley. Motorways and railways make the area very accessible to visitors and connect the Chilterns to nearby London. Opportunities for residents and visitors to enjoy the outdoors are wide-ranging, including extensive rights of way; open access commons, woods and downland; Registered Parks and Gardens open to the public; golf courses; shooting estates; and urban green spaces. The Ridgeway and the Thames Path National Trails pass through the Chilterns, and the River Thames and Grand Union Canal are major water-based recreation corridors.

Human history dates back to the Palaeolithic, as evidenced by flint scatters. Farming of the valleys and escarpment began in the Neolithic and continues to this day as a major land use. Arable farming is concentrated on deep, well-drained soils found in the valleys, along the scarp foot and beneath the hills in the north. Nucleated settlements, often featuring historic buildings dating back to medieval times, are found in the valleys and along the scarp foot, as are the major routes. Chalk streams are found only in the main valleys and can be dry in their upper reaches.

Cotswolds

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 spring lines. Scattered hamlets and isolated farmsteads are found on the higher ground. The limestone creates a strong sense of place and unity which carries through to the buildings and walls which have been built using local limestone for centuries. The distinctive character of the area is reflected in its designation as the Cotswolds AONB, with 65% of the NCA being covered by this designation.

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.

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'.



Midvale Ridge

The Midvale Ridge NCA is a band of low-lying limestone hills stretching east–west from the Vale of Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire to Swindon. It is surrounded by the flat lands of the Oxfordshire clay vales, giving extensive views across the surrounding countryside. It is a predominantly agricultural area with a mixed arable/ pastoral farming landscape, cereals being the most important arable crop. The main towns are Swindon, at the western end, and Oxford, which lies across the centre of the area, but otherwise the settlement pattern is characterised by small nucleated villages along the top of the ridge and along the spring line. The soils types are a mix of heavy rendzinas, stagnogleys and lighter sandy brown earths with small patches of sandy soils.

The area is significant for its geological sites and has been a focus for study since the 19th century. It has yielded fossils of international importance, including the holotypes for several ammonite species and several species of prehistoric sponges known only from the Faringdon area. The unusual geology gives rise to habitats that are uncommon in the south of England, such as calcareous flushes and fens, calcareous heath and calcareous grassland. These in turn support a variety of rare plants and invertebrates. The narrow-leaved marsh orchid, southern damselfly and many scarce wetland flies can be found in the wetlands while the heathland is home to several species of solitary bees. Although the NCA is small, it is also host to other key habitats such as lowland dry acid grassland and acid heath. One of the largest remaining populations of the snakeshead fritillary can be found in the area.

The NCA is notably more wooded in character than the surrounding Upper Thames Clay Vales NCA with about 9% woodland coverage. To the north-east of Oxford lies Shabbington Wood, the largest remnant of the former Royal Forest of Bernwood, which supports an important population of the nationally rare black hairstreak butterfly. Today, about a third of the woodland in the NCA is designated as ancient woodland.

Evidence of previous land use is still clearly visible across the area from iron-age and Romano-British settlements and nationally important examples of ridge and furrow to the remains of quarries. The continued expansion of Swindon and Oxford will present challenges for preserving the landscape character and biodiversity of the ridge but also opportunities for improving the provision of green infrastructure and access. The NCA is dependent for potable water on neighbouring areas such as the Upper Thames Clay Vales NCA and it is expected that, with increasing population, demand will become more acute. Changes in agriculture and continued mineral extraction are also likely to intensify pressure on the area's soil, water and biodiversity resources.

There are many opportunities for recreation within Oxford itself, the Thames Path National Trail passes through the NCA and two national cycle routes cross the ridge. Some 29% of the NCA is designated as greenbelt around the edge of Oxford.

Northamptonshire Uplands

The Northamptonshire Uplands NCA is an area of gently rolling, limestone hills and valleys capped by ironstone-bearing sandstone and clay Lias, with many long, low ridgelines. Rivers flow out from the NCA in all directions, including several major rivers – the Cherwell, Avon, Welland, Tove, Ouse, Nene and Ise. While there are areas of differing character, there are strong unifying landscape features across the Northamptonshire Uplands, most importantly the extensive areas of open field systems with ridge and furrow and the earthworks of deserted and shrunken settlements which occur throughout. Other features include the strong, mostly Parliamentary enclosure pattern with high, wide, A-shaped hedgerows bounding the largely rectilinear fields with their frequent mature ash and



oak trees; the many country houses and their associated extensive areas of historic and nationally important designed parkland landscapes; the distinctive ironstone, cob and brick nucleated settlements with their large stone churches, often with prominent steeples; the narrow lanes with very wide grassy verges; and the small, scattered but prominent broadleaved woods and coverts. There are also wide, long-distance views from the edges and across the ridgetops throughout the area.

Land is in mixed agricultural use, mostly pasture and arable, and reservoirs are a significant feature. Woodland is sparse, with many scattered, small, broadleaved coverts and copses, some in prominent hill-top positions, dotted across the landscape. The few ancient woodlands take on a special value and interest in an NCA with few other areas of semi-natural vegetation and relatively limited wildlife interest. Flood plain grazing marsh occurs around Banbury and there are small, scattered pockets of mire, lowland meadow, calcareous grassland and lowland dry acid grassland throughout the NCA, some designated Sites of Special Scientific Interest for their biodiversity interest. The area is also important for farmland birds.

Around the fringes and two main towns, the area has seen extensive development and construction of major strategic road and rail infrastructure, with associated reductions in levels of tranquillity and loss of rural character, though overall the area retains a strong sense of rural tranquillity. The area is particularly important for delivery of sense of history, sense of place, recreation and water availability and some ecosystem services are under pressure from development and agricultural practice, particularly water availability and water quality, soil erosion, soil quality and tranquillity.

Northamptonshire Vales

The Northamptonshire Vales NCA consists of a series of low-lying clay vales and river valleys, including the valleys of the rivers Nene and Welland and their tributaries. The area is 10% urban, and settlement is often visually dominant. Major road networks that traverse the area include the M1, A45, A6 and A5. This area adjoins the Leicestershire Vales NCA to the north-west and has many similar characteristics.

Despite the predominance of built settlements and related levels of low tranquillity, this contrasts strongly with a distinctly more rural feel and higher levels of tranquillity particularly along river corridors and in areas of arable and pastoral farmland.

This area is rich in historic character, with country houses, historic parkland, ridge and furrow and open field patterns, especially in the valleys of the Welland, Ise and Nene. These river valleys are striking features of the area, with their riverside meadows and waterside trees and shrubs. Also common are the flooded gravel pits and their associated wetlands, which result from reclamation schemes. These have given rise to some of the most important freshwater wetlands in the Midlands, supporting large numbers of wetland birds and wildfowl, especially over winter. The rivers and associated habitats also provide regional ecosystem services such as regulating water flow, quality and availability, as well as providing extensive recreational and biodiversity resources for the surrounding urban areas.

Challenges for this area include retaining the sense of place in light of ongoing pressure for development growth, and protecting and enhancing key features such as the many heritage assets, meadows, woodlands and hedgerows in the light of new development, continuing gravel extraction and the pressure to produce more food. However, these issues also provide opportunities to strengthen and increase habitat networks and appropriate recreational provision for the surrounding urban communities.



Upper Thames Clay Vale

The Upper Thames Clay Vales NCA is a broad belt of open, gently undulating lowland farmland on predominantly Jurassic and Cretaceous clays. Blenheim Palace World Heritage Site falls within the NCA, along with around 5,000 ha of the North Wessex Downs AONB and smaller areas of the Chilterns AONB and the Cotswolds AONB. Two of its SAC are designated for their lowland meadow vegetation communities, while Little Wittenham SAC has one of the most studied great crested newt populations in the UK. There are contrasting landscapes, including enclosed pastures of the clay lands with wet valleys, mixed farming, hedges, hedge trees and field trees and more settled, open, arable lands. Mature field oaks give a parkland feel in many places.

The area encircles the Midvale Ridge NCA and covers an extensive area of low-lying land extending from Wiltshire and Gloucestershire to the west of Swindon through to Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire in the east. It comprises two separate sub-character areas: the Wiltshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Vales to the north; and the Vales of White Horse and Aylesbury to the south. The area is dominated by watercourses, including the Thames and its tributaries, and there are also lakes associated with mineral extraction areas. Watercourses and lakes provide important areas for wildlife and recreation. There are a number of major transport routes and patches of intensive industrial influence, including Didcot Power Station. There is little woodland cover (around 3 percent) but hedgerows and mature field and hedgerow trees are a feature, and many watercourses are fringed with willow or poplar.

The area's internationally important lowland meadows require enhanced management alongside improved care of adjacent land, and its wetland habitats require appropriate hydrological regimes to be secured and an ecological network that is resilient to climate change. Wet grassland and wetland habitats also offer opportunities to manage floodwaters and improve water quality.

Potential growth of urban areas, particularly around Oxford and Swindon, may provide opportunities for creation of significant areas of accessible natural greenspace as part of comprehensive green infrastructure planning.

1.3.3.4 Previous Characterisation Work in Oxfordshire¹³

National Historic Landscape Work:

Roberts and Wrathmell's work dividing England into provinces based on historic settlement forms and patterns puts most of Oxfordshire into the Central Province, a 'planned landscape' in which villages predominate over dispersed settlement and whose fields were once open, but have largely been subjected to various forms of post-medieval enclosure.¹⁴ Only the most southern part of the county, including the Berkshire Downland and Chilterns, is put into a different province. This is the South Eastern province, an 'ancient landscape' of more dispersed farming settlements and more irregular field patterns.

¹³ Oxfordshire County Council Historic and Natural Environment Team. Historic Landscape Characterisation Project Design. February 2012. Pp. 9-11

¹⁴ Roberts, B. & Wrathmell, S. 2000 An Atlas of Rural Settlement in England. An Atlas of Rural Settlement in England, 2003 corrected reprint edn. London: English Heritage.



County and District Historic Landscape Work:

In 1993 three small areas of Oxfordshire were used for an experimental pilot HLC project, 'Oxfordshire' by Paul Chadwick.¹⁵

A full Historic Landscape Characterisation Assessment has been produced for the **Cotswold AONB** by Gloucestershire County Council.¹⁶ This included those areas of the AONB falling within Oxfordshire.

In 2009, the Chilterns Conservation Board, English Heritage, and Buckinghamshire County Council completed a **Chilterns AONB** Historic Landscape Characterisation project, covering the designated AONB and an area immediately around it, some of which fell in Oxfordshire.¹⁷

The **North Wessex Downs AONB** Historic Landscape Characterisation project was completed in 2006 by West Berkshire Council, English Heritage, and the North Wessex Downs AONB service. It was subsequently updated in 2012 by Wyvern Heritage and Landscape Consultancy.¹⁸

Oxford City District Council completed an Historic Landscape Characterisation study of the city in 2011.¹⁹

County and District Landscape Work:

Various District Landscape Character Assessments (LCAs) have been undertaken, but all of these were published prior to the 2002 guidance, so vary in compliance to the national standards used by this project.²⁰

South Oxfordshire District Council carried out its own Landscape Assessment in 1998.²¹

The Vale of the White Horse District Council published a series of Landscape Assessments as part of the technical appendices included within the updated Local Plan 2031.²²

Cherwell District Council produced a Landscape Assessment in 1995.²³

West Oxfordshire District Council produced a Landscape Assessment in 1998.²⁴

The **Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study (OWLS)** was published in 2005 and is accessible [online](#).²⁵ It is the County Council's current landscape assessment and identifies twenty-four separate

¹⁵ Reported on in Fairclough et al. 1999.

¹⁶ Hoyle, J. 1999. Historic Landscape Characterisation: Cotswolds AONB. Gloucestershire County Council and English Heritage

¹⁷ Green, D. 2009. Chilterns Historic Landscape Characterisation Project: The Changing Landscape of the Chilterns.

¹⁸ Goodacre, Melissa 2006 North Wessex Downs AONB HLC; Rouse, E. 2013. North Wessex Downs AONB Historic Landscape Character Areas Final Report. Wyvern Heritage and Landscape Consultancy.

¹⁹ Beckley, Ruth 2011 Historic Landscape Characterisation: Oxford City. English Heritage and Oxford City District Council.

²⁰ Natural England. 2002. Landscape Character Assessment Guidance for England and Scotland.

²¹ South Oxfordshire District Council 1998: South Oxfordshire Landscape Assessment.

²² Vale of the White Horse New Local Plan 2031. 2016.

²³ Cherwell District Landscape Assessment 1995

²⁴ West Oxfordshire Landscape Assessment 1998

²⁵ Oxfordshire County Council, 2004. Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study.



landscape types within the county, made up of individual landscape description units with a similar pattern of geology, topography, land use and settlements. It particularly examines the relationship between landscape, biodiversity, and cultural features, although the study did not include historic landscape characterisation.

Archaeological Surveys:

*The Deserted Villages of Oxfordshire*²⁶ was the first countywide archaeological survey of Oxfordshire. However, it only covers the pre-1976 county.

Benson and Miles' work, *The Upper Thames Valley: an archaeological survey of the river gravels*,²⁷ was the most extensive survey of this kind ever produced, and demonstrated the incredible wealth of cropmark evidence by bringing together the results of fifty years of aerial reconnaissance and mapping and interpretation.

This was closely followed in 1975 by Gates' work, *The Middle Thames Valley: an archaeological survey of the river gravels*,²⁸ which synthesised the results of twenty five years of aerial survey.

Both of these pivotal works were forerunners of the National Mapping Programme initiated by English Heritage. In Oxfordshire this has already covered the course of the River Thames, *The Thames Valley Project – A report for the National Mapping Programme*,²⁹ and a limited area of the Lambourne Downs. A further area (SE Warwickshire/Oxfordshire) was carried out in 2012, during the life of this project.

Historic Towns in Oxfordshire: A survey of the new county,³⁰ provided an historic environment survey of 19 historic market towns as well as the Roman town of Alchester.

The Archaeology of the Berkshire Downs: an introductory survey,³¹ examined the chalk uplands of West Berkshire. This included a limited area of Oxfordshire land between the northern scarp of the downs and the Berkshire/Oxfordshire border.

The Archaeology of the Oxford Region,³² provided the first comprehensive synthesis by period of the archaeology of the region, and used information from the County Sites and Monuments in the production of period and thematic maps.

Martin Tingle's work, *The Vale of the White Horse Survey. The study of a changing landscape in the clay lowlands of southern England from prehistory to the present*,³³ arose out of the Maddle Farm

²⁶ Allison, K., Beresford, M., Hurst, J. et al. 1965. *The Deserted Villages of Oxfordshire*. Leicester: The University Press.

²⁷ Benson, D and Miles D 1974 *The Upper Thames Valley: An Archaeological Survey of the River Gravels*. Oxford: Oxford Archaeological Unit.

²⁸ Gates, Timothy 1975 *The Middle Thames Valley: An Archaeological Survey of the River Gravels*. Reading: Berkshire Archaeological Trust.

²⁹ Fenner, V. & Dyer, C. 1994. *Thames Valley Project – A report for the National Mapping Programme*. Historic England

³⁰ Rodwell, K. (ed.) 1975. *Historic Towns in Oxfordshire: A survey of the new county*. Oxford: Oxfordshire archaeological Unit.

³¹ Richards, J. 1978. *The Archaeology of the Berkshire Downs: an introductory survey*. Reading: Berkshire Archaeological Trust.

³² Briggs, M., Cook, J. & Rowley, T. 1986. *The Archaeology of the Oxford Region*. Oxford University, Department for External Studies.



Project, and examined a transect covering 18.5 km² from the Middle Chalk near Uffington Castle to an outcrop of ferruginous sand at Badbury Hill. The survey comprised field walking and surface collection, with one very limited trial excavation.

The Extensive Urban Survey for Oxfordshire, subsequently called *Oxfordshire Historic Towns Survey*, was begun in 2004, but was halted in January 2008 after the completion of the Abingdon report. In addition, reports were completed for Stanford-in-the-Vale, Wantage, Shrivenham and Watchfield, and Great Faringdon.³⁴

The *Thames through Time* series (2007-2011), produced by Oxford Archaeology, provides a useful summary and assessment of sites and the historic environment in the Thames Valley in chronologically ordered volumes.³⁵

The Oxfordshire Aggregates and Archaeology Assessment 2011, produced by Oxford Archaeology for English Heritage and funded by the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund, quantified and reviewed the archaeological potential of the aggregate areas in Oxfordshire in order to provide an assessment of the threat to the archaeological resource from future aggregate extraction.

1.4 Using the Oxfordshire HLC

The HLC consists of spatial data (GIS polygons) each with an entry in an attached database that can be used to prepare a short report. There is also a current overview report which includes more generalised descriptive and interpretative texts for each of the HLC Types identified within Oxfordshire. The overview report for each HLC Type is available for download from the Project Documentation section of the project [webpage](#).

The GIS polygons have been created by grouping together individual land units shown on the OS MasterMap which have a common current and previous land use. The attributes of these polygons are used to assign the polygon to an HLC Type. In rural areas the minimum size for polygons was two hectares. In urban areas the minimum size was one hectare.

Each polygon created has data attached to it. This data is stored in a database and can be exported as a pdf report. This written report describes the attributes of each polygon; the date at which the current type was created; any information available on previous types; sources used; and linked Historic Environment Record monuments. To request this detailed information, please contact the [Historic Environment Record Officer](#), quoting the HLC Unique Identification number (HOX...) for the relevant polygon(s).

³³ Tingle, M. 1991. The Vale of the White Horse survey: the study of a changing landscape in the clay lowlands of southern England from prehistory to the present. BAR British Series. Vol. 218.

³⁴ Oxfordshire County Archaeological Service. 2010. Oxfordshire Historic Towns Survey, Historic Urban Character Areas for Shrivenham and Watchfield, Stanford in the Vale, and Wantage.

³⁵ Booth, P., Dodd, A., Robinson, M. & Smith, A. 2007. The Archaeology of the Gravel Terraces of the Upper and Middle Thames: Early Historical Period AD 1 – 1000. Lambrick, G., Robinson, M. & Dodd, A. 2009. The Archaeology of the Gravel Terraces of the Upper and Middle Thames: The First Foundations of Modern Society in the Thames Valley 1500 BC-AD 50; Dodd, A. (ed.). 2011. The Archaeology of the Gravel Terraces of the Upper and Middle Thames: Early Prehistory to 1500 BC.



As noted, HLC is a tool to better understand the historic time-depth in any given area. It can be used for:

- The conservation and management of heritage sites and landscapes
- Planning application and development strategy
- Landscape management schemes
- Academic and local research
- Community projects and initiatives

1.5 Copyrights and Disclaimer

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Unless otherwise stated, all photographs have been taken by the author.

The Oxfordshire HLC was completed in 2016 and any updates will be on a piecemeal and ad hoc basis. It is an interpretive record of the landscape and should not be considered 'set in stone'. It is a broad-brush approach to interpreting the landscape and should be viewed at an appropriate scale. It was created independently of the Historic Environment Record, but should be used in combination with other datasets such as this. For meaningful results, the spatial data must be used in conjunction with the written report (accessible [here](#)).