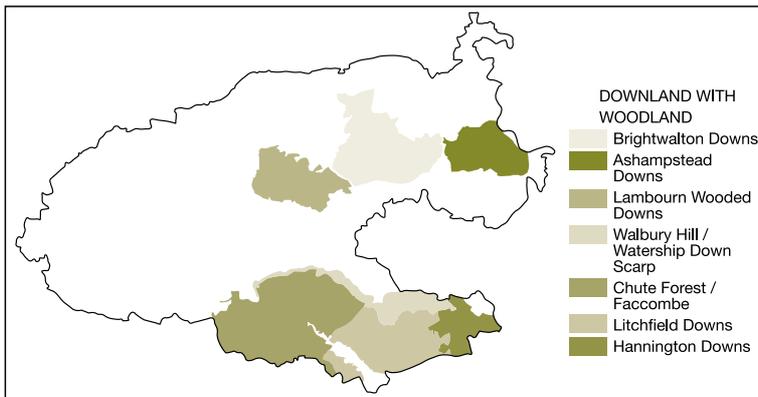


The North Wessex Downs landscape

A landscape assessment of the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



Downland with Woodland



This is a landscape defined by contrast: of open rolling downland and enclosed woodland, of light and shade, and of prospect and refuge. Its beauty was brought vividly to life as the setting for the picturesque saga ‘Watership Down’ by Richard Adams [10], which describes the detail and nuance of the landscape through a rabbit’s-eye view in the book’s opening paragraph:

“The primroses were over. Towards the edge of the wood, where the ground became open and sloped down to an old fence and brambly ditch beyond, only a few fading patches of pale yellow still showed among the dog’s mercury and oak tree roots... at the bottom of the slope ran the brook, no more than three feet wide, half-choked with king-cups, water-cress and blue brook-lime. The cart-track crossed by a brick culvert and climbed the opposite slope to a five-barred gate in the thorn hedge. The gate led into the lane.”

The landform is typical of chalk scenery with a strongly rolling topography, rising to gently domed hilltops and dissected by dry valleys. A thick mantling of Clay-with-Flint differentiates this landscape type from the open chalklands, producing softer contours on the summits and creating heavy moist soils which have retained their woodland cover. Sinuous woodlands cling to the steep slopes and, with the interconnected hedgerow network, create a strong framework and sense of enclosure in some areas. Ridge top woods are a particular feature and form dark wooded horizons, providing containment to the views. These enclosed areas are juxtaposed with contrasting more open arable and pastoral summits and those areas where remnant chalk grassland survives on the steep slopes of the dry valleys and scarps. It is a tranquil, sheltered landscape.

Ancient and semi-natural woodlands and hedgerows are an important ecological resource. Wooded commons and deer parks illustrate former

land uses, originating from medieval deer parks enclosed from areas of Royal Forest. A number of these deer parks were refashioned in the 18th century and now are formal parkland landscapes, as at Facombe Manor and Netherton House.

The Downland with Woodland landscape type is found in two main blocks. The first is north of the River Kennet encompassing the downs around Brightwalton, Ashampstead and Lambourn Woodlands. The second block

The dark wooded horizons contrast with the open, rolling arable fields. Membury, Lambourn Wooded Downs



Countryside Agency/Ann Selth

rises as an escarpment south of the Kennet, stretching from Chute Forest in the west to the Lichfield and Hannington Downs in the east and forms the beginning of the main chalk upland of the Hampshire Downs. Bronze Age and Iron Age hill forts located on high summits, such as Walbury Hill, Beacon Hill and Ladle Hill, are visible features of the southern escarpment and command panoramic views of the surrounding area.

Settlement is dispersed throughout this landscape type, with numerous isolated farms and small clustered hamlets and villages sheltering in folds in the chalk topography or exposed on the ridge tops. Evidence from the Domesday Survey of 1086 suggests that many of these were created during the early medieval period, typically with a church or manor house, with widespread use of redbrick, flint, weatherboard and clay tile. These are often attractive and popular places to live and include villages such as Brightwalton, Burghclere and Hannington. Settlements are connected by an intricate network of narrow winding lanes, many originating as medieval droeways, sunken into the chalk with a dense overhanging woodland canopy and high grassy banks.

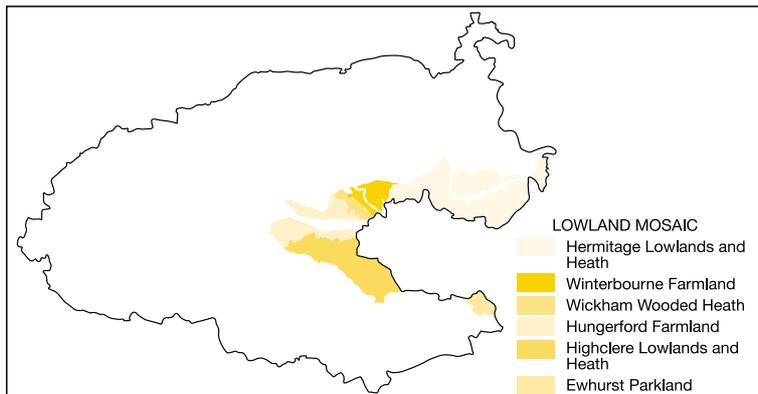
The Downland with Woodland remains a deeply rural landscape with a strong sense of peacefulness and tranquillity. This special perceptual quality is articulated by Richard Adams describing early morning on the Downs [10]:

“During the last fifty years the silence of much of the country has been destroyed. But here, on Watership Down, there floated up only faint traces of the daylight noise below.”

Key characteristics

- Elevated chalk plateau distinguished by a thick capping of Clay-with-Flint.
- A strongly rolling landform with domed hill tops, dry valleys and scarps.
- Enclosure provided by hedgerows and a mosaic of woodland cover, notably on the clay summits and as sinuous hangers along steep slopes.
- A diverse range of woodlands, including wooded pasture, parkland, ancient and secondary semi-natural woodland, plantation and shelterbelts.
- Remnants of chalk grassland, including two of the largest areas of protected chalk grassland in the AONB.
- Characterised by Bronze Age and Iron Age hill forts situated on prominent hill tops forming very visible and distinctive features.
- Numerous historic parks and designed landscapes, many originating as medieval deer parks.
- A wide range of field patterns – assarted fields, large, wavy sided fields and fields bounded by tracks and roads, all typical of medieval enclosure, set against a more open landscape dominated by Parliamentary enclosure fields.
- Small villages nestled in sheltered valleys or strategically located on ridgetops with widespread scattered farmsteads and hamlets.
- Varied building styles, including redbrick, flint and render and weatherboard, with roofs of tile and thatch.
- Small, attractive settlements with good accessibility – a popular place to live.
- An intricate network of rural lanes, including characteristic sunken lanes overhung by deep grassy banks and woodland.
- Recreational opportunities characterised by a high density of footpaths, bridleways and byways.
- A peaceful and tranquil rural landscape.

Lowland Mosaic



"Here the woods are all yellow - big, yellow woods. I never saw them more lovely. The other day we went gathering chestnuts. There were quite a number. This is a pleasant place."

D H Lawrence [13].

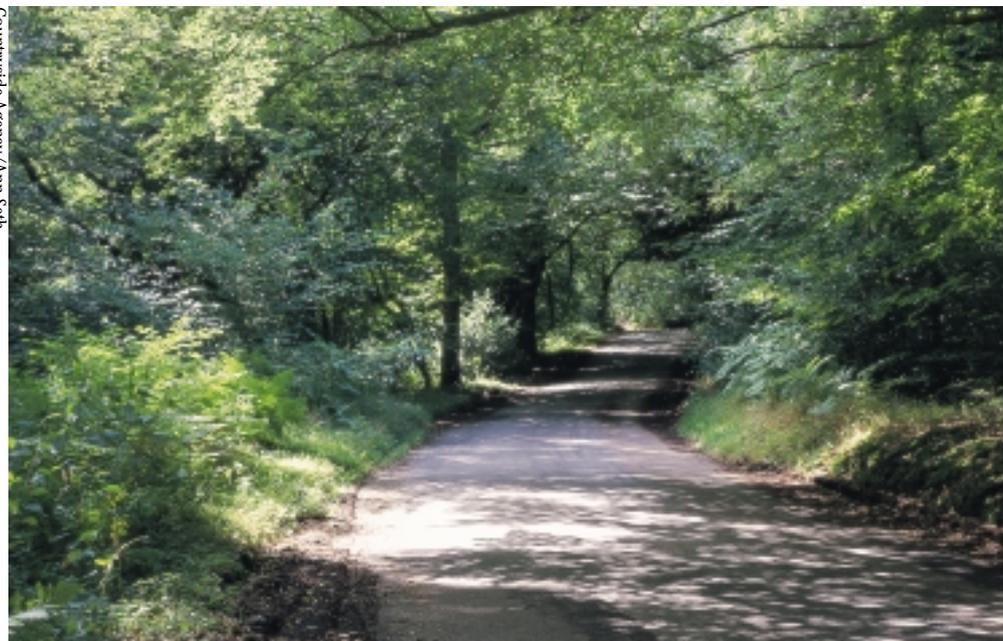
A lane weaves its way through woodland

One of the most densely inhabited parts of the North Wessex Downs, this lowland area has a diverse range of settlements ranging from large manor houses associated with the many parklands, to the network of hamlets, lines of houses and villages that occur along the lanes and roads. Some villages have a clear nucleus, typically associated with a village green or church, whilst others follow a more dispersed pattern typical of post medieval 'squatter' settlement. Red brick and tile are the principal building materials.

It is generally a small-scale intimate landscape with the widespread settlement linked by an intricate network of narrow rural lanes, winding through a mosaic of ancient semi-natural woodlands, plantations and more open farmland areas. The lanes are frequently overhung by deep grassy or woodland banks and contribute to the secluded, enclosed character. The varied geology of clays, silts, sands and gravels gives rise to a diverse mix of soils and habitats. Small areas of heathland on the drier gravel ridges are a distinctive and important feature, although many formerly open areas have reverted to scrub or woodland. The network of ancient semi-natural woodland, connecting hedgerows, areas of parkland including wood pasture and veteran trees create considerable ecological interest.

Former medieval deer parks are a particular feature, as illustrated at Englefield, Highclere and Hampstead, with a number of these being refashioned in the 18th century as formal designed parks and gardens.

Countyside Agency/Ann Seth





Countryside Agency/Ann Seth

Landcover includes a mosaic of farmland, scrub and blocks of woods

Key characteristics

- Underlain by a geology of clays, silts, sands and gravel, in strong contrast to the chalk. The pattern essentially comprises clay on the lower land, separated by gravel ridges.
- A low-lying, undulating area enclosed by the chalk to the north, south and west and forming part of the Thames Basin Heaths which extend to the east of the AONB.
- A mosaic of landcover including fragments of remnant heathland, extensive woodlands and pasture, as well as more open areas of arable land.
- Ecologically important habitats, including ancient woodland, pasture woodland, parkland, ancient hedgerows, neutral grassland, hay meadows, heathland, acid grassland, bogs, fens and open water.
- Parklands, many originating as medieval deer parks, with subsequent designed landscape schemes, are a particular feature.
- Varied field pattern with irregular fields, interspersed with parcels of woodland and commons indicative of medieval and post medieval assarts. Fields with parallel and sinuous boundaries predominate and represent 'ladder' fields probably resulting from informal enclosure, plus large regular fields of Parliamentary enclosure.
- One of the most densely settled landscape types, with a diverse range of settlements ranging from large manor houses, villages, numerous hamlets and lines of houses along the roads and lanes.
- Varied settlement form with villages often having a clear nucleus, typically associated with a village green or a church. A more dispersed pattern may derive from 'squatter' settlement or disafforested areas.
- An intricate network of wooded rural lanes, plus a large number of footpaths, bridleways, and byways form an excellent resource for informal recreation. Visitor attractions include a number of historic houses and parklands.
- Well settled landscape with a rising population due to proximity and accessibility to centres such as Reading, Newbury and Basingstoke.