National Character Area profile:

# 86. South Suffolk and North Essex Clayland

Supporting documents





www.naturalengland.org.uk

## Key characteristics



Large, often ancient hedgerows link woods and copses to form wooded skylines, that are a key characteristic of the area.

- An undulating chalky boulder clay plateau is dissected by numerous river valleys, giving a topography of gentle slopes in the lower, wider valleys and steeper slopes in the narrower upper parts.
- Fragments of chalk give many of the soils a calcareous character, which also influences the character of the semi-natural vegetation cover.
- South-east-flowing streams and rivers drain the clay plateau. Watercourses wind slowly across flood plains, supporting wet, fen-type habitats; grazing marsh; and blocks of cricket-bat willows, poplars and old willow pollards. Navigation locks are present on some rivers.
- Lowland wood pasture and ancient woodlands support the dormouse and a rich diversity of flowering plants on the clay plateau. Large, often ancient hedgerows link woods and copses, forming wooded skylines.
- The agricultural landscape is predominantly arable with a wooded appearance. There is some pasture on the valley floors. Field patterns are irregular despite rationalisation, with much ancient countryside surviving. Field margins support corn bunting, cornflower and brown hare.
- Roman sites, medieval monasteries and castles and ancient woodlands contribute to a rich archaeology. Impressive churches, large barns, substantial country house estates and Second World War airfields dot the landscape, forming historical resources.

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## Key characteristics continued...

- There is a dispersed settlement pattern of scattered farmsteads, parishes and small settlements around 'tyes' (commons) or strip greens and isolated hamlets. The NCA features a concentration of isolated moated farmsteads and numerous well-preserved medieval towns and large villages.
- Larger 20th-century development has taken place to the south and east around Chelmsford, Ipswich and the new towns of Harlow and Stevenage.
- Traditional timber-frame, often elaborate buildings with exposed timbers, colour-washed render, pargeting and steeply pitched roofs with pegtiles or long straw thatch. Sometimes they have been refronted with Georgian red brick or Victorian cream-coloured bricks ('Suffolk whites'). Clay lump is often used in cottages and farm buildings.
- Winding, narrow and sometimes sunken lanes are bounded by deep ditches, wide verges and strong hedgerows. Transport infrastructure includes the A14, A12, M11 and Stansted Airport.
- A strong network of public rights of way provides access to the area's archetypal lowland English countryside.

# Statements of Environmental Opportunity

**SEO 1: Maintain and enhance the character of this gently undulating, rural landscape by maintaining agricultural productivity and encouraging sustainable land management practices that protect and enhance the landscape, geodiversity and biodiversity assets and networks to benefit geodiversity, biodiversity, carbon storage and water quality, as well as the over-riding sense of place.**

**For example, by:**

- Encouraging sustainable farming practices and the diversification of cropping and livestock to support the continued production of food supplied to local and national markets and the financial security of rural businesses.
- Working with farmers and landowners to create ecological networks through the farmed landscape to benefit biodiversity (for example by increasing farmland bird populations) and to enhance ecosystem services, such as by intercepting surface water to improve water quality and by providing more habitats for pollinator and pest-regulating species.
- Restoring important characteristic ancient field boundary patterns and parish boundaries with substantial hedges, together with the historical pattern of farmsteads (many with 17th-century or earlier buildings), through recording, promoting, understanding and recognising their historic significance.
- Encouraging farmers to protect watercourses from water quality deterioration, reducing diffuse pollution by encouraging soil management improvements and the uptake of beneficial agri-environment schemes and options. Ensure compliance with regulations on nitrate vulnerable zones to manage fertiliser inputs.
- Encouraging the reversion from arable to permanent grassland and the creation of grass margins in arable fields on valley sides, to help reduce soil erosion and sedimentation of watercourses, especially within the priority catchments.
- Enhancing soil condition through good soil management techniques that reduce erosion, improve productivity and have a positive effect on water quality. This can be achieved through reducing cultivation and soil compaction, creating grass margins in arable fields and restoring boundary hedgerows, which will also increase habitats for pollinators and pest-regulating species.
- Facilitating the ability of viable agricultural businesses to undertake more tailored agricultural and conservation management, incorporating uncultivated margins to arable fields in order to support rare arable weeds and farmland bird species (for example yellowhammer, grey partridge and tree sparrow).
- Ensuring that land management practices maintain and, where necessary, improve the condition of the Sites of Special Scientific Interest.
- Working in partnership with farmers to encourage the appropriate design and sensitive siting of new on-farm water storage, which will help to reduce the impact of water abstraction and enhance biodiversity and landscape character.
- Ensuring that advice is provided to support and enable sustainable farming practices to be carried out efficiently, including follow-up monitoring and advice, to help inform future land management decisions.

**SEO 2: Protect and enhance the area's ancient woodland cover, parkland trees, river valley plantations and ancient hedgerows, through the management of existing woods and the planting of new woods, hedgerows and hedgerow trees to benefit landscape character, habitat connectivity and a range of ecosystem services, including timber provision, the regulation of soil erosion and the strengthening of the sense of place and history.**

**For example, by:**

- Seeking opportunities to restore and enhance ancient woodland habitats, particularly using techniques such as coppicing, to enhance landscape character and biodiversity, especially assemblages of flora, invertebrates and woodland birds.

- Encouraging the reinstatement of active management of existing farm woodlands where they have been neglected, re-introducing sustainable traditional management techniques such as selective felling, pollarding and coppicing, to strengthen the historic landscape character and support biodiversity. Where appropriate, exploit commercial opportunities for resulting wood fuel.

- Encouraging local businesses to increase appropriate-scale generation of heat, utilising woody biomass for woodchip boilers, where it is sustainable to do so. This will in turn bring further opportunities for improved woodland management, while being mindful of locally valued landscape characteristics, habitats and species.

- Encouraging the planting of new woodlands on former woodland sites or adjacent to existing sites using local native species, where this results in enhanced ecological connectivity and benefit to the traditional wooded appearance and character.

- Encouraging communities and schools to become involved in creating, conserving and enhancing local woods and orchards, by working with partners to promote volunteering opportunities.

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**Conserving historic parklands, with their important veteran trees with ancient woodland habitats is particularly important for saproxylic species and hole-nesting birds.**

**SEO 2: Protect and enhance the area's ancient woodland cover, parkland trees, river valley plantations and ancient hedgerows, through the management of existing woods and the planting of new woods, hedgerows and hedgerow trees to benefit landscape character, habitat connectivity and a range of ecosystem services, including timber provision, the regulation of soil erosion and the strengthening of the sense of place and history.**

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- Increasing poplar and willow plantations where appropriate and where there is no conflict with the historic landscape; that is, particularly along the River Blackwater between Witham and Kelvedon. This will enhance woodland character.
- Conserving historic parklands, with their important veteran trees (for example those at Ickworth), in particular focusing on the continuity of the mature and veteran tree resource in the parklands and in the surrounding landscape.
- Restoring traditional orchards, once a feature of many settlements, which contribute to the area's sense of place and genetic diversity.
- Conserving, managing and replanting hedgerows, especially those that are ancient and species rich, in a manner consistent with the historical patterns, particularly in areas that will help to regulate soil erosion.
- Encouraging the planting of characteristic hedgerow trees from existing hedgerow stocks; that is, oak in Suffolk and field maple and hornbeam in Essex. This will enhance landscape diversity and ecosystem services, including carbon storage. It will also help to counteract the threats to landscape character and biodiversity from tree diseases such as ash die-back.
- Protecting ancient hedgerow pollards, which are an important habitat for saproxylic beetles and hole nesting birds.
- Ensuring that new hedgerow planting on the plateau does not block important views and overly enclose the landscape. Planting characteristic species mixes will support biodiversity and landscape character and should include hawthorn, blackthorn, hazel, field maple, dogwood, spindle and small-leaved lime (derived from woodland).
- Extending and linking woodland sites, including orchards, through the expansion and enhancement of semi-natural linear features such as hedgebanks, streams, sunken hedged lanes, grass verges and farm woodlands, enhancing biodiversity and landscape character.

**SEO 3: Enhance the slow-flowing, winding rivers and their pastoral valley flood plains that provide linkages through the landscape, including redundant sand and gravel extraction sites, for their ecological, historical and recreational importance. This will support the operation of natural processes and their contribution to biodiversity, geodiversity, soil quality, water availability and regulating water flow and their function in contributing to the character of the area.**

**For example, by:**

- Working with watercourses to support the operation of natural processes to help reduce bank erosion and improve water quality.
- Conserving and managing the range of riverine and wetland habitats and landscapes, incorporating uncultivated margins and established habitat to protect watercourses in order to support rare species such as otters.
- Working with landowners to protect, enhance and reinstate fen-type flood plain habitats and to maximise opportunities to expand and link these habitats and their connections to rivers for breeding waders (for example, lapwing and snipe) and overwintering wildfowl. These habitats also make an important contribution to the landscape character.
- Restoring, repairing and enhancing river valley grasslands (where appropriate), supporting and reinstating grazing regimes. Where possible, manage livestock access to rivers and streams to prevent bank damage and increased sedimentation in the priority catchments of the Stour, Colne, Gipping, Cam and Stort.
- Protecting the archaeology and history of human settlement in the flood plain areas, by encouraging appropriate non-intensive land management and reinstating permanent pasture and grazing marsh habitats.
- Managing and enhancing the river flood plains for their flood storage capacity and identifying areas where bank and channel management can be altered to improve natural river profiles and connection with the flood plain, supporting the operation of natural processes.
- Managing extraction of the sand and gravel resource within the flood plains to minimise damage to existing habitats, geodiversity features and archaeological sites.
- Conserving and enhancing the network of geological sites that contribute to the understanding of the area's geology, in particular the disused quarries and pits.
- Continuing to restore mineral extraction sites to a variety of wetland habitats, for their multiple benefits for nature conservation, recreation and landscape interests.
- Working in partnership to reduce threats posed by non-native species' colonisation of the open water and riverine habitats.

**SEO 4: Conserve and enhance the distinctive character of the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty with its much-visited 'Constable Country' and improve opportunities for people to enjoy and understand the distinctive assemblage of historic landscapes outside the AONB. Ensure that access and recreational resources are managed to be compatible with the tranquillity of the area and the special qualities of protected landscapes, while providing a valuable health, education and access resource.**

**For example, by:**

- Working with the AONB Management Plan and using the special qualities, elements and features of the Dedham Vale AONB to plan landscape restoration, creation and enhancement activities to improve public enjoyment and understanding of the landscape.
- Exploring working with partners and organisations that support volunteering in the natural environment, which provides opportunities for people to increase their knowledge and understanding of the local area, while also benefiting habitats and species.
- Encouraging local schools and community groups to become involved in projects and other educational opportunities to develop a better understanding of their natural and historical environment and help to preserve it for the future.
- Creating access opportunities with consideration to minimising the risk of damage to landforms from recreation, particularly in the valleys, and promoting public appreciation of the geological resource by local communities and visitors.
- Managing and further enhancing the access and recreation opportunities, which centre on enjoyment of the tranquil and deeply rural countryside via the network of quiet lanes, villages, footpaths, bridleways and watercourses, to facilitate and encourage access to the wider countryside for all users.

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**The village of Kersey, which although outside of the Dedham Vale AONB, is a popular visitor desination.**

**SEO 4: Conserve and enhance the distinctive character of the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty with its much-visited 'Constable Country' and improve opportunities for people to enjoy and understand the distinctive assemblage of historic landscapes outside the AONB. Ensure that access and recreational resources are managed to be compatible with the tranquillity of the area and the special qualities of protected landscapes, while providing a valuable health, education and access resource.**

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- Promoting access to, interpretation of and understanding of less well-known sites and features to accommodate and diffuse tourism. This will help to maintain existing levels of tranquillity and manage landscape character pressures, especially in the AONB.
- Enhancing existing sustainable networks and providing links to growth areas and the wider countryside to help to link people with places.
- Enhancing and promoting the access network within, and connecting to, river corridors, for biodiversity, geodiversity, recreation and health benefits.
- Promoting links between geological sites, archaeological evidence and the biological interest of these areas, to achieve wider public understanding and enjoyment.
- Promoting sustainable tourism, such as access to visitor attractions via green infrastructure networks, including cycling and walking (for example, the Stour Valley Path and the Essex Way) and other sustainable transport options, to improve health and wellbeing and enjoyment of the environment, while supporting the local economy.
- Managing visitor pressures at popular and sensitive sites by investing in high-quality infrastructure and interpretation. Ensure that new infrastructure meets the different needs and levels of use of a range of visitors (for example, local communities, recreational day visitors and tourists) without being the cause of damage to or degradation of natural assets.

# Additional Opportunity

**1: Encourage measures that lead to the enhancement of existing historic settlements and sites of archaeological interest and the design and location of new developments and infrastructure. Provide wider associated social and cultural benefits through the provision and management of high-quality green infrastructure networks.**

**For example, by:**

- Conserving the historic environment and key features of 'ancient countryside' such as timber-frame houses, moated farmsteads, historic churches, barns, castles and enclosure patterns, together with sites of archaeological interest.
- Within urban areas creating new multifunctional landscapes and habitats and extending at appropriate scales existing networks that are in character with the area and contribute to biodiversity through green infrastructure planning.
- Working with partners to ensure that water resources and flood risk management issues within areas of settlement can be addressed in a sustainable way, to accommodate future planned growth.
- Conserving and appropriately managing the area's sense of place within the built environment and using this understanding, and the area's traditional settlement patterns, to plan for and inspire new development, particularly around Ipswich, Chelmsford, Harlow and Stevenage.
- Conserving traditional building features that are distinctive to the area, including pargeting, straw thatch, flint-knapped churches, weatherboarded post windmills and the traditional riverside features such as water mills, which have a strong visual impact in the landscape.
- Ensuring that high-quality green infrastructure is considered in all new-build projects, encouraging developers and planners to consider this aspect at the outset of scheme design with the aim of promoting space for wildlife and outdoor recreation.
- Promoting the use of traditional building materials in building restoration or new development where this would be appropriate, to enhance the local character (for example, exposed timbers, colour-washed render (in traditional colours), pargeting, cream bricks ('Suffolk whites') or soft-hued red bricks).

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**1: Encourage measures that lead to the enhancement of existing historic settlements and sites of archaeological interest and the design and location of new developments and infrastructure. Provide wider associated social and cultural benefits through the provision and management of high-quality green infrastructure networks.**

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- Raising the profile of the area by promoting the 'wool towns' as a destination 'brand', which includes distinctive features such as the historic picturesque settlements (for example Lavenham, Cavendish and Thaxted with their large, highly decorated churches), local produce and the area's deeply rural and tranquil character.
- Ensuring that local development frameworks recognise the importance of conserving and enhancing the landscape to help to reduce the likelihood of negative impacts from new developments.
- Working in partnership with businesses within the AONB and nearby to encourage best practice to ensure that measures are taken to control light and noise pollution in order to protect the area's special qualities and high levels of tranquillity.
- Supporting the use of historic and landscape characterisations to inform change, and encouraging their use in community-based planning to help to identify locally valued townscapes, rural landscapes and heritage assets.
- Investigating ways of securing better management of the heritage assets that contribute to the character of the area, particularly those that have been identified as 'Heritage at Risk'.
- Conserving and interpreting historic features in the landscape, including traditional farmsteads and buildings, and geological and archaeological interest features such as ancient wood banks and earthworks, while recognising the potential for undiscovered remains.



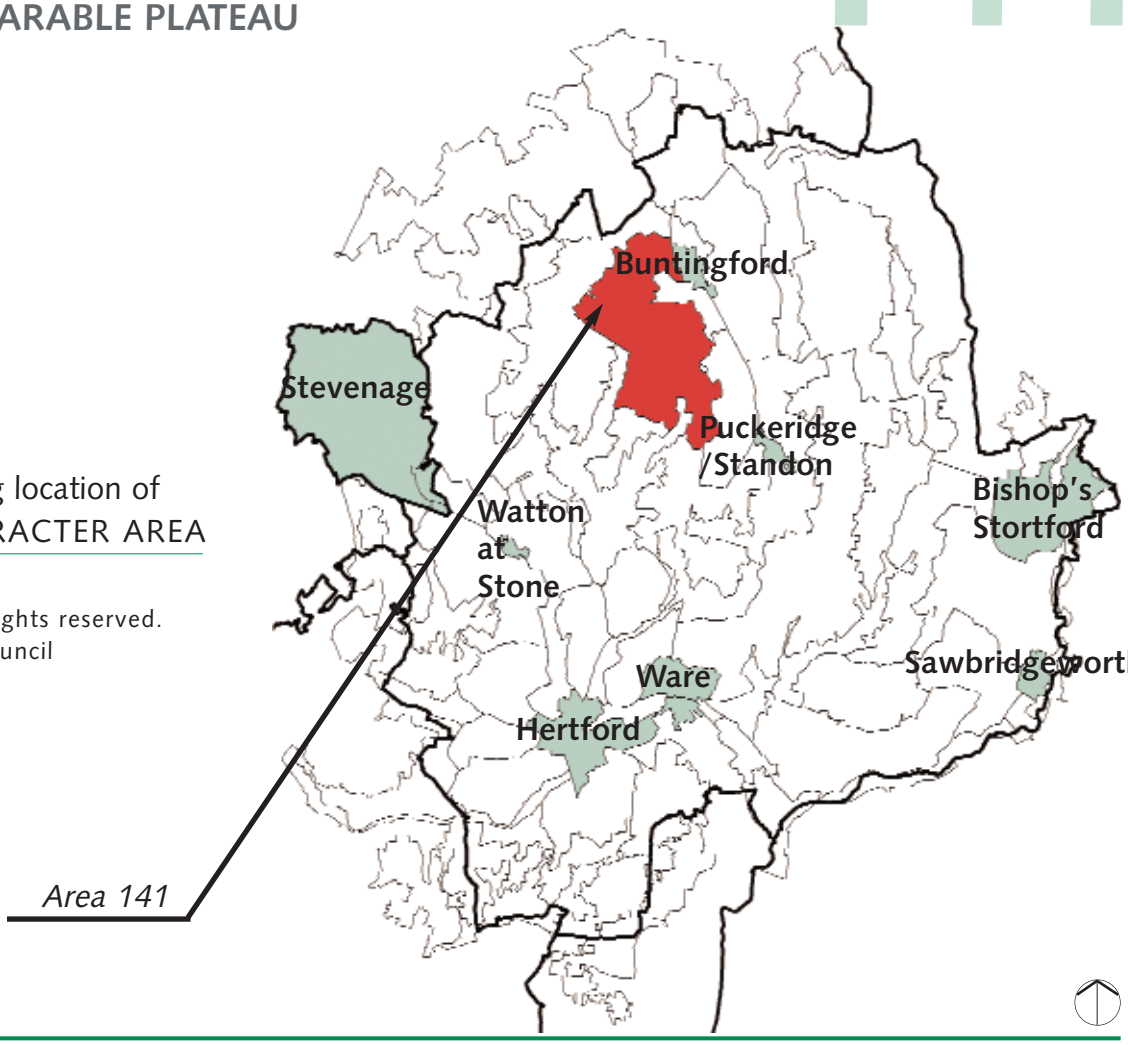

# Supplementary Planning Document

# Landscape Character Assessment

Development Plans Team
September 2007

# Area 141

## CHERRY GREEN ARABLE PLATEAU




District map showing location of LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREA

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100019606 2004

### LOCATION

The area is located on the elevated plateau between the valley of the River Rib to the east and the more settled plateau to the west. It stretches from Throcking in the north to Nasty in the south.

### LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

The area is principally an open arable landscape with extensive views over a gently undulating plateau. The area retains a historic ambiance through the winding lanes, however many of the features have been eroded or disappeared completely including a deserted medieval village. Settlement comprises isolated farms and the occasional cottage. There are few features of note within the area with the most prominent landmarks being outside the area.



Great Munden Church
(HCC Landscape Unit)

### KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- open arable plateau with some very large field units
- minimal settlement, restricted to individual farmhouses
- remote and isolated feel
- minimal woodland cover
- degraded landscape pattern with few hedgerows and associated trees
- organic winding lanes with few direct connections across the plateau, (except for A507)
- water towers, LV electricity cables and aerial masts locally prominent features due to open landscape
- open views across plateau and to valley of the Rib

### DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

- deserted medieval village of Wakeley
- Sainsbury's distribution depot (outside area)
- Throcking Church (outside area)

# CHERRY GREEN ARABLE PLATEAU - Area 141

## PHYSICAL INFLUENCES

***Geology and soils.*** The geology of the area comprises a chalky till boulder clay overlying the solid chalk of the escarpment dip slope. The soils are almost entirely dominated by calcareous boulder clay, except for minor areas of peri-glacial sand or gravel at the heads of minor valleys draining the area. Chalk also tends to outcrop in these areas. Soils are slowly permeable with a slight risk of water erosion, (Hanslope association).

***Topography.*** The plateau gently undulates from north to south. There is a more marked break of slope to the east where the plateau meets with the High Rib Valley and to the south where it meets a number of the tributaries of the River Beane.

***Degree of slope.*** The main plateau falls by about I in 300, but there are local undulations in the plateau, typically up to about 1 in 20. These are most noticeable in the upper tributaries that flow into the Rib Valley to the east.

***Altitude range.*** The dip slope plateau slowly falls from about 141m in the north at Buttermilk Farm to 124m in the south at Mently Lane.

***Hydrology.*** The clay tends to be poorly-drained, and so there are clusters of old ponds such as at Cherry Green, Wakeley and Westmill Green. Others are scattered at farmsteads and field corners. The only flowing water is in seasonal drainage ditches, particularly the upper tributary of the Old Bourne, Aspenden Brook and Thistley Vale Brook. Some minor spring-fed streams arise above Westmill.

***Land cover and land use.*** The dominant land cover and land use is open large scale arable agriculture. There are a number of small woods, but these are discrete and isolated. There is minimal pasture.

***Vegetation and wildlife.*** Now mostly arable, the area formerly had extensive old, damp neutral pastures, but these are now very limited, with remnants at Westmill Green, Wakeley and Cherry Green. The most extensive remnants of unimproved grassland now tend to occur on road verges and green lanes, such as at Cherry Green, although even some of these have suffered badly from severe management. Ancient semi-natural woodland is limited, but includes Graves Wood, Thrift Wood, Berkesdon Green Spring and Wakeley Spring, all of which are primarily ash/maple woodlands, sometimes with frequent field elm. The limited ponds in the area tend to be eutrophic and neglected.

## HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

There is limited evidence in the form of cropmarks and chance finds for settlement activity on the plateau since the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods, and the area may have supported a network of small dispersed settlements and farmsteads similar to those of today since the Roman, and certainly since the medieval period. A substantial Roman site, possibly a villa, is known on the plateau edge west of Westmill. Historically the Parishes of Aspenden, Westmill and Great Munden have always included parts of the valley of the River Rib to the east (see Area 142), where occupation, including the villages of Aspenden and Westmill, has been attracted to the valley slopes, close to Roman Ermine Street (the A10). The plateau itself is sparsely populated, with small hamlets and isolated farms and houses. While many perpetuate a longstanding settlement pattern, other sites have shifted or declined during the medieval and post-medieval periods. Whilst the deserted settlement earthworks at Great Munden and Wakeley are adjacent to existing settlements; many other examples are now isolated, such as the former settlements at Berkesdon Green, Westmill Green and Throcking, and the moated manorial sites near Gardners, Tannis Court, Mill Farm, Rush Green and Stockalls.

At Cherry Green, 'Buttonsnap' a picture book thatched cottage was inherited by Charles Lamb in 1812, but sold three years later for £50.

***Field Patterns.*** The field pattern, was originally one of unenclosed common arable fields and lesser areas of irregular enclosure, probably formed before the 18th century. It is now dominated by large 'prairie' fields. These have succeeded interim stages of gradual 18th and 19th century enclosure, and later, piecemeal 20th century enclosure and amalgamations creating large expansive prairie field units. Hedged field boundaries have been mainly removed. There are a few small areas where these smaller pre-18th century irregular fields survive, east of Nasty, around Cherry Green and Wakeley, and west of Berkesdon Green. There is little pasture or woodland in the area and it is evident that woodland cover was already slight by the later 19th century, due the long term use of the area for arable cultivation.

***Transport pattern.*** With the exception of the A507 Baldock Road which passes through the north of the area there are no direct routes across the area making it remote and isolated in character. The dispersed farmsteads are served by various narrow sinuous winding lanes and tracks. Most of the roads, including the A507, are locally sunken in the undulations and to the plateau edge. They are partially bounded by mixed native hedges but invariably are more open in character. The trackway Back Lane, follows the line of the Roman road that linked Baldock and Braughing, and it has been the historic boundary between the parishes of Westmill and Great Munden since at least the medieval period.

***Settlements and built form.*** Settlement within the area is sparse and limited to isolated farmsteads often at the end of long tracks and a few small hamlets such as Cherry Green. There are a few vernacular buildings including barn conversions however a number of the buildings and farmsteads are architecturally poor and add little to the locality.

## OTHER SOURCES OF AREA-SPECIFIC INFORMATION

English Heritage: Schedule entry

Pevsner, N., rev. Cherry, B., Hertfordshire, Penguin (2000)

# CHERRY GREEN ARABLE PLATEAU - Area 141

## VISUAL AND SENSORY PERCEPTION

The plateau landscape is visible from both the neighbouring plateaux and the upper slopes of the Rib Valley. There are extensive views within the area and the scale of the area is large with exposed views. As a result it is visually sensitive to changes in built form. The area mainly has a quiet and remote feel apart from where locally closer to the A507 and the A10 corridor.
***Rarity and distinctiveness.*** The landscape is a fairly frequent landscape type within the county with no major distinctive characteristics.

## VISUAL IMPACT

The major visual impact on the area comes from the perimeter of Buntingford with significant impact arising from both industrial and residential developments on the upper slopes of the Rib Valley. The widest reaching single impact is caused by the Sainsbury's warehouses, which are major structures on the skyline to the east.

## ACCESSIBILITY

There is an moderate to sparse network of rights of ways in the area, including byways such as Back Lane, footpaths and bridleways. A number of these provide links between the Rib valley and the Ardeley/Cottered Settled Plateau.

## COMMUNITY VIEWS

Although data is limited this area appears to be regarded as very distinctive [B]
"Greater beauty lies…where the rolling hills between Stevenage and Buntingford extend in an unbroken vista. The wayfarer will see that mere height is a less important feature of a countryside than generous contours and rich colouring. Here too are the great cornfields to cheer the eye, with narrow paths traversing them." H. Shelton 'Lovely Britain' Ed by SPB Mains & Tom Stephenson. Odhams. No date

## LANDSCAPE RELATED DESIGNATIONS

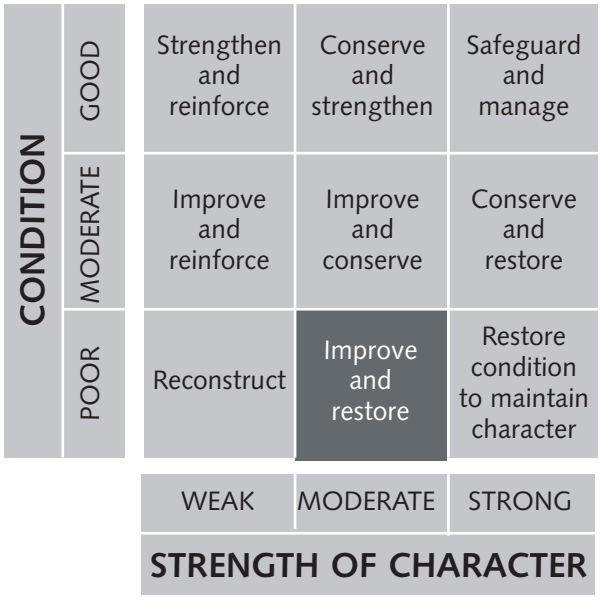
SM: Site of St Giles Church and medieval Village - Wakeley Farm
Areas of Archaeological Significance (to higher ground to east)

## CONDITION

| | |
|---|---|
| *Land cover change:* | insignificant |
| *Age structure of tree cover:* | mature |
| *Extent of semi-natural habitat survival:* | relic |
| *Management of semi-natural habitat:* | poor |
| *Survival of cultural pattern:* | declining |
| *Impact of built development:* | moderate |
| *Impact of land-use change:* | low |

## STRENGTH OF CHARACTER

| | |
|---|---|
| *Impact of landform:* | prominent |
| *Impact of land cover:* | dominant |
| *Impact of historic pattern:* | apparent |
| *Visibility from outside:* | locally visible |
| *Sense of enclosure:* | exposed |
| *Visual unity:* | coherent |
| *Distinctiveness/rarity:* | frequent |



# CHERRY GREEN ARABLE PLATEAU - Area 141

## STRATEGY AND GUIDELINES FOR MANAGING CHANGE: IMPROVE AND RESTORE

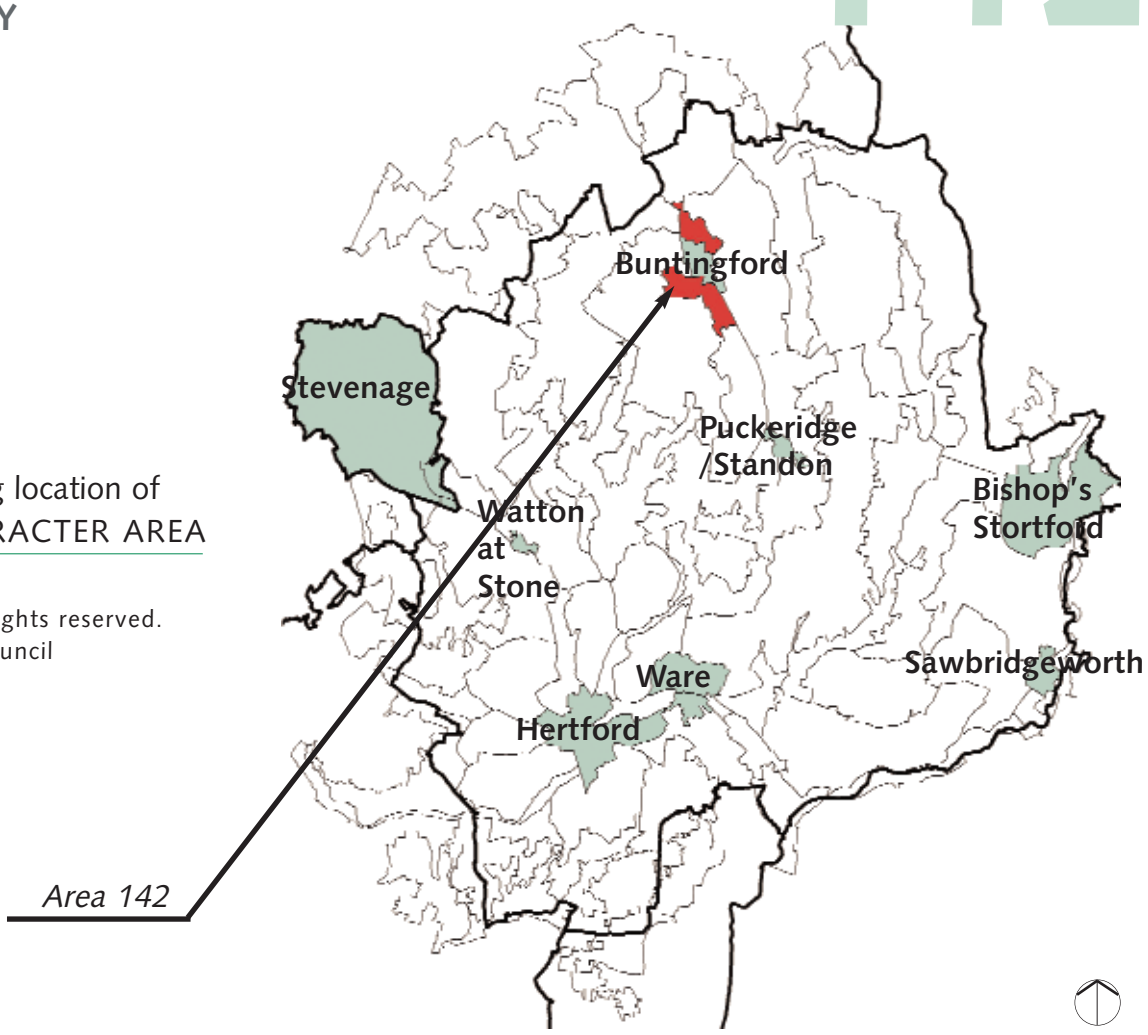
- promote the appropriate management of coppice woodland in order to re-establish a rich ground flora and the distinction between different management systems, such as high forest and coppice with standards
- promote the creation of new small to medium scale native broadleaved woods throughout the area to reduce the scale of the open arable areas, using ancient hedge and field boundaries to locate the most appropriate location for wood restoration and expansion
- promote both the creation of new ponds and the retention / enhancement for wildlife of existing ponds
- promote the creation of buffer zones between intensive arable production as important semi-natural habitats and the creation of links between semi-natural habitats. Buffers also to target rights of way where possible
- promote selected hedgerow restoration and creation throughout the area to provide visual and ecological links between existing and proposed woodland areas. Pattern to follow historic field boundaries and/or rights of way where possible
- ensure that the surroundings of converted and new buildings are designed and maintained to be in keeping with their agricultural surroundings by ensuring that hard landscape and 'Garden' details are be screened from view where possible and native species are used for hedging and tree planting to the perimeter
- promote a strategy for reducing the visual impact of development on the upper slopes of Buntingford including the Sainsbury's warehouses
- maintain and develop the traditional pattern of roadside verges as a local feature and a wildlife resource. Where development is likely to affect verges and damage is unavoidable, development should include details of protection of the remaining verge and replacement of its nature conservation value within the proposed scheme. This is particularly important where verges include hedgebanks, sunken lanes, ditches, hedges and hedgerow trees



Arable plateau near Wakeley (J.Billingsley)

# Area 142

## HIGH RIB VALLEY




District map showing location of LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREA

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Hertfordshire County Council
100019606 2004

### LOCATION

Upper stretches of the River Rib between Westmill in the south and Chipping in the north.

### LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

The area represents the last section of the River Rib that retains a distinctive valley form and associated land uses. Further north and out of the area the river climbs onto the high plateau and has more the character of a local stream. The area is effectively divided into two sub areas by Buntingford which initially developed along the Ermine Street corridor, but in the 20th century has spread up the valley sides. The Rib is marked by a combination of pasture and riparian trees, however arable fields are found both close to the valley bottom and on the slopes. The villages of Aspenden and Westmill are historically coherent and contain a number of fine traditional buildings and groupings. There are areas of parkland supporting traditional grazing e.g. Corney Bury. The A10 corridor is a strong feature of the area and the traffic is locally intrusive as are some of the built features within Buntingford.



### KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- relatively narrow valley feature
- mixed land use including arable and pasture
- small to medium scale landscape in contrast to open arable areas to the adjacent plateaux
- historic villages to valley edge at Westmill and Aspenden
- parkland at Corney Bury
- sub-divided by Buntingford
- willow and poplar tree lined watercourse
- urban influence of Buntingford locally intrusive
- A10 corridor and associated traffic
- limited rights of way

### DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

- ruined St Bartholomew's Church- Buntingford on plateau edge
- Sainsbury's distribution depot
- Westmill village centre

Westmill (HCC Landscape Unit)

# HIGH RIB VALLEY - Area 142

## PHYSICAL INFLUENCES

***Geology and soils.*** The geology of the river valley comprises chalky till, which overlies most of the dip slope of the escarpment including the upper valleys. The underlying chalk is exposed in places, notably above Corney Bury Park. The soils are dominated by neutral/calcareous boulder clay soils which are deep and well drained with a mix of fine and coarse loamy soils and some calcareous sub soils, (Melford Association). There are some mixed fluvo-glacial gravels and alluvium which occupy the Rib Valley floor.

***Topography.*** The valley forms the upper reaches of the Rib as it flows off the dip slope of the chalk escarpment. The valley is more defined to the south but becomes less pronounced to the north where it merges with the upper plateau landform.

***Degree of slope.*** Along the valley floor the slope is typically less than 1 in 250. The side slopes range from 1 in 20 to 1 in 10.

***Altitude range.*** Along the valley floor the levels drop from 100m near Chipping to 80m above Westmill. Across the valley the side slopes are typically 10-20m above the valley floor.

***Hydrology.*** The valley contains the upper reaches of the River Rib which is a relatively small feature in itself. However the line of the river is marked in part by poplars, willows and some pasture at Corney Bury. There is a ford within Buntingford. The river is fed by a number of secondary ditches and streams including Aspenden Brook. The River Rib is affected by arable run-off, but Aspenden Brook is less eutrophic, feeding The Bourne downstream to Westmill. The only substantial standing water is Westminster Pond at Aspenden.

***Land cover and land use.*** Land cover includes arable to the valley slopes and floor and pasture associated with the settlements of Westmill, Aspenden and the parkland at Corney Bury. To the fringes of Buntingford the land use is more fragmented and smaller in scale. There are limited areas of scrub, mainly around Buntingford.

***Vegetation and wildlife.*** The area has limited semi-natural habitat. Old secondary woodland and wooded hedges are important at Aspenden. Extensive old grasslands at Corney Bury and Westmill have unfortunately been improved. St Batholomew's Churchyard is of local importance, and the developing verges of the A10 bypass at Buntingford are becoming more important. The River Rib, with its marginal stands of trees, is only of local value in the Westmill area. Westminster Pond is too heavily shaded to be of any special value.

Old hedge banks by Corney Bury Park are recorded as a site for the nationally scarce mollusc Ena montana. The uncommon arable weed Shepherd's Needle is a feature of fields near St Bartholomew's Church. There are a number of fine mature trees within the villages and the parklands of Corney Bury and Aspenden.

## HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

This valley area is dominated by the urban settlement of Buntingford, which lies at the intersection of five medieval parishes and the junction of two significant roads, the Roman road Ermine Street (the A10) and Hare Street, at the point at which the Roman road forded the River Rib. Buntingford itself probably grew as a settlement from the 13th-century, superseding an earlier now deserted settlement at Layston on the plateau edge, close to St Bartholomew's Church, (now disused) which served the town of Buntingford until 1901. Within Buntingford the Almshouses are reputably the work of the 17th century chemist Robert Hooke.

While there is some evidence for human activity in the High Rib Valley from the Neolithic period, the current settlement pattern reflects the medieval and post-medieval development of the area. Settlements existed at Layston (now deserted), Aspenden and Westmill before 1066, and manorial sites at Corney Bury, Aspenden Hall, Westmill and Layston.

***Field Patterns.*** The area is exceptional for its well-preserved field systems and parklands. There are a few small blocks of pre-18th century common arable and meadow pasture, now superseded by 19th century enclosure, and later 20th century prairie fields, particularly around the bypass. However the greater part of the area comprises the post-medieval or earlier informal parklands surrounding Corney Bury and Aspenden Hall, and the significant block of small, irregular fields, formed by pre-18th century enclosure, that lies north of Westmill.

***Transport pattern.*** The historic Roman Road, Ermine Street, now the A10, passes north-south through the area. Buntingford grew up along the original linear alignment developing as a typical coaching town. The route south of the town is unchanged, but the A10 now bypasses the town to the west before rejoining the original alignment near Chipping to the north. Remaining roads are more minor and sinuous in character linking the smaller settlements of Aspenden, Westmill and around the fringes of Buntingford. Some of the lanes are sunken on the slopes. The eastern bank of the A10, south of Buntingford is retained by rows of visually inappropriate concrete slabs.

***Settlements and built form.*** Aspenden and Westmill are attractive traditional settlements with focal parish churches. and a large number of vernacular buildings, using a mix of thatch, pargeting, brick and clay tiles together with some relatively sympathetic modern infill. Aspenden nestles in a tributary valley to the Rib and is largely contained by mature trees and hedges. Aspenden Brook runs through the village and a number of properties are accessed by bridges across the stream. Westmill is located within the main valley west of the flood meadows. The village features an attractive tree lined village core, elegant Georgian houses and a diminutive green complete with well-pump. North of Buntingford Corney Bury is red bricked 'E' shaped house with mullion and transom windows. The historic core of Buntingford lies along the old A10 with a number of Georgian and Victorian houses. Modern estates have developed to the fringes of the town.

## OTHER SOURCES OF AREA-SPECIFIC INFORMATION

Pevsner, N., rev. Cherry, B., Hertfordshire, Penguin (2000)

# HIGH RIB VALLEY - Area 142

## VISUAL AND SENSORY PERCEPTION

The valley landscape is locally visible from outside the area from the adjacent plateaux edges. Within the area there is a small to medium scale with contained views and a coherent though at times diverse character. Riverside vegetation and the presence of livestock grazing helps to highlight the line of the watercourses and meadows. The A10 follows and cuts through the area and brings visual and audible distraction. North of Buntingford the diverted A10 means that Corney Bury has benefited. The upper slopes accessed off The Causeway towards St Bartholomew's provide some attractive views to the west over the town of Buntingford.

***Rarity and distinctiveness.*** The valley landscape is fairly unusual in the county. The villages of Westmill and Aspenden and the riverside parkland at Corney Bury are the most distinctive features.

## VISUAL IMPACT

There are a number of visual impacts on the area. These originate from the fact the river valley has also developed as a transport corridor. The most extensive visual impact comes from the adjacent residential developments, which in some cases lie adjacent and unscreened e.g. northern edge of Buntingford overlooking Corney Bury. The A10 is also locally intrusive, but contains sections in cutting. The slab detailing to the eastern verge south of the town is visually jarring. The widest reaching single impact is caused by the Sainsbury's distribution warehouses, which are major structures on the ridgeline, particularly as seen from the south.

## ACCESSIBILITY

Despite the relatively attractive quality of the area and the local population, the river valley is poorly served with rights of way, with no access to Corney Bury and access to Westmill only by road from Buntingford. There are a few footpaths from and to Aspenden, but minimal equestrian access.

## COMMUNITY VIEWS

Although data is incomplete this area appears to be one of the most highly valued in the district and this is not limited to the nationally-noted village of Westmill [A].

"Buntingford nestles well into the Rib Valley" (Respondent 1633, SPD Counsultation Response 2006).

## LANDSCAPE RELATED DESIGNATIONS

Areas of Archaeological Significance: at Westmill, Buntingford and Corney Bury

## CONDITION

| | |
|---|---|
| *Land cover change:* | localised |
| *Age structure of tree cover:* | mixed |
| *Extent of semi-natural habitat survival:* | linked |
| *Management of semi-natural habitat:* | not obvious |
| *Survival of cultural pattern:* | interrupted |
| *Impact of built development:* | high |
| *Impact of land-use change:* | moderate |

## STRENGTH OF CHARACTER

| | |
|---|---|
| *Impact of landform:* | prominent |
| *Impact of land cover:* | prominent |
| *Impact of historic pattern:* | apparent |
| *Visibility from outside:* | locally visible |
| *Sense of enclosure:* | contained |
| *Visual unity:* | coherent |
| *Distinctiveness/rarity:* | unusual |

| CONDITION | WEAK | MODERATE | STRONG |
|---|---|---|---|
| GOOD | Strengthen and reinforce | Conserve and strengthen | Safeguard and manage |
| MODERATE | Improve and reinforce | Improve and conserve | Conserve and restore |
| POOR | Reconstruct | Improve and restore | Restore condition to maintain character |

STRENGTH OF CHARACTER

# HIGH RIB VALLEY - Area 142

## STRATEGY AND GUIDELINES FOR MANAGING CHANGE: IMPROVE AND CONSERVE

- ensure new planting is encouraged to maintain age diversity in parklands and village environments of Westmill and Aspenden. Ensure landscape improvements respect the historic context of existing features and the form and character of parkland and gardens. Ornamental species should only be used to replace damaged or over-mature specimens
- restrict further ploughing of grasslands within parklands and encourage reversion from arable uses to pasture and grassland with historically accurate specimen tree planting
- survey and manage parkland and veteran trees for biodiversity value, including Aspenden, Westmill and Corney Bury
- protect the remaining river valley habitats of nature conservation interest, especially where they contribute to a suite of habitats, such as neutral grassland, running water, wet grassland, valley or floodplain woodland and grazing marsh
- resist development that could lower the water table within river valleys and affect wetland habitats
- promote a strategy for reducing the visual impact of development on the upper slopes of Buntingford including the Sainsbury's warehouses
- improve the management of old meadows and pastures e.g. at Corney Bury by ceasing fertilizer and herbicide application and introducing sensitive grassland management such as late hay cutting or low density livestock grazing
- promote the enhancement of the River Rib and its tributaries by the creation of wetland landscape features such as reedbeds, ponds and scrapes
- promote the management of existing riparian trees including pollarding. Promote additional tree planting of native water loving species, willow, alder and poplar to emphasize the line of the watercourse
- promote the creation of buffer zones between intensive arable production and important semi-natural habitats and the creation of links between semi-natural habitats
- conserve unimproved and semi-improved grassland wherever possible, avoiding agricultural improvements to reduce their acid or calcareous nature, in order to maintain their nature conservation value
- traffic calming measures, where considered necessary, must be of a scale and design that relates to the local the landscape character of the settlement. The use of unsympathetic materials, such as concrete paviors, coloured concrete and brightly coloured road markings should be avoided and kerbing should be kept to a minimum
- maintain and develop the traditional pattern of roadside verges as a local feature and a wildlife resource. Where development is likely to affect verges and damage is unavoidable, development should include details of protection of the remaining verge and replacement of its nature conservation value within the proposed scheme. This is particularly important where verges include hedgebanks, sunken lanes, ditches, hedges and hedgerow trees
- develop a strategy for the planting and management of the A10 corridor through the area that respects the historic setting but minimizes the visual context in keeping with local character
- encourage the development of an improved network of rights of way both along and across the valley giving enhanced recreational opportunities for residents



Corney Bury Parkland
(HHC Landscape Unit)