1. Avebury Plain
2. Marlborough Downs
3. Savernake Plateau
4. Horton Down
5. Salisbury Plain (West)
5. Salisbury Plain (East)
6. Chute Forest
7. Kennet Valley
8. Salisbury Avon Valley
9. Vale of Pewsey
10. Bristol Avon Clay Vale
11. Spye Parklands
Overview

A topographically homogenous area of relatively simple geology extending north from the village of Avebury. The area forms part of a plateau above the lower lying clay vale to the west and north in North Wiltshire and Swindon Borough respectively, and below the scarp rising to the Marlborough Downs to the east. The area is characterised by vast prairie-like arable fields lying below the scarp to the east of the A4361, while to the west of the road there is a mixture of enclosed arable and pasture land, forming the settings of the villages of Winterbourne Monkton, Winterbourne Bassett and Broad Hinton. Extensive arable fields characterise the area to the north west of Avebury. The spectacular archaeological remains at Avebury lie in the southernmost part of the area.

Geology and Landform

In this part of Kennet the Upper, Middle and Lower Chalk dip gently toward the south east, and the Avebury Plain is formed by the eroded surface of the Lower Chalk. The eastern edge of the area follows the foot of the steep scarp of the harder Middle and Upper Chalk. In the north-west the boundary runs along the crest of another scarp which falls away and is created by the Lower Greensand and the Gault. These rocks are harder than the Kimmeridge Clay which forms the vale beyond. Although apparently almost flat, the area slopes gently toward Avebury, following the very shallow alluvial valley of the Winterbourne until it joins the Kennet on the northern edge of Avebury.

Landcover

The free-draining chalky soils and level land favour intensive arable cultivation, with very large field units. Field boundaries to the east of the A4361 tend to be fences or other insubstantial features and there are few hedgerows or hedgerow trees outside the enclosed fields east of Winterbourne Monkton and west of Berwick Bassett and Broad Hinton. These areas, which also include some small copses, have a higher proportion of pasture, which with the better hedgerow vegetation creates a more intimate character in contrast to the open lands to the east. Further south the confluence of the Winterbourne and Kennet creates small areas of riparian character within a shallow open valley, characterised by isolated mature willows and lush pasture.

Historic Landscape Character

Neolithic development of Avebury Plain was dominated by the area around Avebury, which includes the Avebury henge and Windmill Hill causewayed enclosure, Silbury Hill and the monument known as The Sanctuary. During the Bronze Age, following the completion of the outer circle at Avebury, the avenue of stones from Avebury to The Sanctuary was constructed, and at the same time the timber circle at The Sanctuary was replaced by concentric stone circles. There is virtually no evidence for Iron Age occupation in the area, suggesting that the importance of Avebury during the Bronze Age had declined. Similarly, very little Romano-British evidence is noted.

The Avenue at Avebury looking south east toward West Kennett
During the Saxon period Avebury village (within the circle) was established, although there is little evidence to indicate the extent of any further settlement within the vale. The medieval period saw the establishment of the villages along the Winterbourne, and post-medieval development of the area continued this pattern. Many of the buildings built in Avebury during this period used stone from the prehistoric henge, much of which was destroyed as a result.

Although the Avebury Plain was intensively farmed throughout prehistory, and remains the focus for the majority of the prehistoric ‘ritual’ monuments within the Kennet landscape, the post-medieval Enclosures effectively created the present day landscape and removed all trace of the former agrarian characteristics. The distinctive pattern of villages spaced along the upper reaches of the Kennet are characteristic of the pattern of dispersed Saxon and medieval settlements seen elsewhere in the District along the Rivers Avon and Bourne.

Settlement and Buildings

Avebury and Avebury Trusloe are dramatically located within and about the stone circle with a consequent important landscape setting and relationship between building materials and landscape. Avebury Manor and church are important buildings, and other buildings form scattered groups. Local stone including sarsen and flint, render and brick are all typical materials, together with clay tiles and straw thatch for roofing.

The villages further north are mostly small, and typically consist of a nucleus of church, rectory, manor house/farm with cottages extending outward from this group. This has given most of the settlements a linear form. Building materials include plenty of sarsen stone, some of it apparently taken from the stone circles of Avebury. Stone is used in conjunction with brickwork to create a characteristic vernacular of window dressings, quoins, string courses etc. At Winterbourne Monkton, Middle Farm has a Georgian farmhouse with large thatched barns, all of sarsen stone. More recent development has taken place at Broad Hinton.

Landscape and Visual Character

The distinctive character of this area is defined by its relative simplicity in topographical and visual terms. The plain is dominated by the open rolling arable landscapes to the east which provide views for almost the full length of the area from some points in the north. To the west there is a contrasting, pastoral, character with areas of open pasture and, further west, lower intervisibility created by smaller fields bounded by stronger hedgerows and trees and by the built form of the villages themselves. In the southern part of the area open arable fields again predominate north west of Avebury, and here they combine with the historic character of the location to create the setting for Avebury.

The individual components of this area may be broken down, and key characteristics are illustrated in Figure 8.1, and summarised below.

Open Chalk lowland:
- open lowlands with no significant hedgerow structure and few trees;
- sweeping vistas of intensively farmed lowland,
- post and wire fence boundaries which in some cases have become defined by tall weed and scrub growth;
- commonly found at the interface with the Chalk Uplands;
- predominantly intensively farmed but may include both arable and pasture;
- generally chalky soils;
- high degree of intervisibility.
- pasture is nearly all reseeded.

Enclosed Chalk lowland
- definite hedgerow structure;
- ranges in scale from very large expansive fields to smaller more intimate field patterns;
- hedgerow trees along boundaries with roads and between fields;
- areas of more intact structure may often be found near to settlements or woodland.
- hedgerows generally well maintained and complete, and include individual and groups of mature hedgerow trees;
- moderate to low intervisibility.
Valley floor pasture.
- occupying the river floodplain; underlain by alluvium and generally under permanent pasture;
- characterised by willows and alders in hedges and along watercourses;
- attractive, pastoral character;
- poor hedgerow structure and relatively few mature trees along watercourses; open character.

Key Landmarks and Landscape Features

- the internationally important archaeological complex of Avebury, with its stone circles and outlying standing stones;
- Windmill Hill north west of Avebury;
- Silbury Hill (in local views);
- the prominent scarp rising to the Marlborough Downs east of the area.
Landscape Quality and Key Issues

All of this character area lies within the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, confirming its outstanding quality and national significance.

The character area also includes a number of other features of conservation value which contribute to its overall significance, including:

- **Conservation Areas** at Avebury and Avebury Trusloe
- a number of non-statutory sites of nature conservation interest, including **unimproved chalk grassland** and scattered remnants of **ancient semi-natural woodland**
- a large number of **Scheduled Ancient Monuments** set within an archaeological landscape of international importance, recognised by the designation at Avebury of a World Heritage Site.

Overall, the Avebury Plain has a distinctive mix of open rolling arable landscapes, and more intimate pastoral countryside. Much of the area has been strongly influenced by intensive arable farming, and while the resultant landscape is in part sweeping and dramatic it is also visually arid over much of the eastern part. Most localised variations in quality and condition are related to the effects of agricultural land management practice. Different strategies for management and enhancement are shown in Figure 8.2.

The principal factors that potentially threaten landscape quality in this area are:

- further agricultural intensification, particularly the conversion of grassland to arable, the removal of natural vegetation cover and the poor maintenance and loss of field boundaries;
- the development of large agricultural buildings within landscapes of high intervisibility;
- inappropriate development or land use management which could damage the setting of the Avebury WHS;
- scrub invasion of open downland.

Guidelines for Avebury Plain Landscapes

**Enhancement priorities**

- retain areas of permanent pasture and unimproved grassland, particularly within areas of archaeological value (e.g. Windmill Hill), and manage to prevent scrub encroachment;
- regulate grazing and recreational pressure on archaeological sites to prevent damage to monuments;
- within the corridor of the Winterbourne, reinstate hedges and introduce new tree planting along watercourses and in lines and groups along the floodplain, using typical riparian species such as willow and alder;
- improve landscape structure along the corridor of the A4361, to mitigate adverse impacts on surrounding landscape, and retain mature boundary trees and replant as necessary, particularly to replace dead or diseased elms;
- maintain and enhance the pattern of smaller fields, hedges and hedgerow trees around Avebury village.

**Development sensitivities**

- the whole area has an essentially rural, agricultural character within which only small-scale, sensitively-designed development, associated with existing built form, could be successfully accommodated without adverse landscape impacts;
- the historic features associated with the Avebury World Heritage Site are particularly sensitive to change and development.
affecting the integrity or setting of these resources would be inappropriate;

- the enclosed farmland with a weak hedgerow structure and the flat, open arable landscapes which dominate this area are very visually exposed and development of any kind would be highly prominent over long distances and when viewed from the chalk scarp and uplands of the Marlborough Downs;

- areas of vale floor pasture associated with the Winterbourne and River Kennet represent a scarce landscape resource and are also visually exposed, making them particularly sensitive to change;

- areas of enclosed farmland with an intact hedgerow structure are more visually contained. These areas are potentially more able to accommodate that essential development which must be located in the countryside, but only where it would not compromise their rural, unspoilt character.