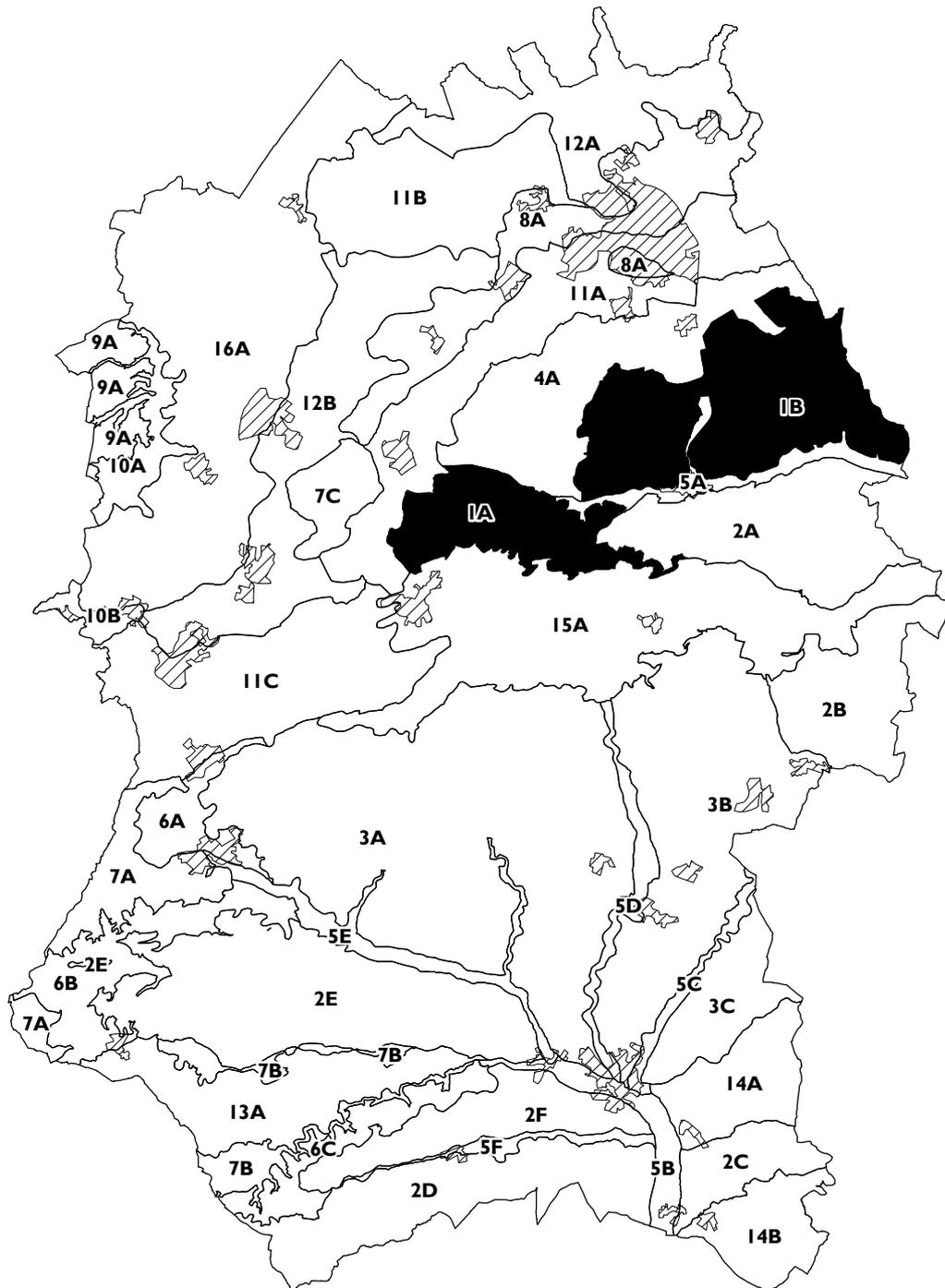


LANDSCAPE TYPE I: OPEN DOWNLAND



I: OPEN DOWNLAND



LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREAS

- 1A** Horton Downs
- 1B** Marlborough Downs
-  Urban Area

TYPE I: OPEN DOWNLAND

DESCRIPTION

Location and Boundaries

The *Open Downland* Landscape Type is an expansive area forming a high, undulating chalk plateau extending northeast from central Wiltshire, with boundaries defined by the elevated topography and Upper Chalk geology. Within this landscape type, there are two geographically distinct character areas. Area *IA: Horton Downs* rising above the Vale of Pewsey and the *IB: Marlborough Downs* extending north of the Kennet River Valley.

The *Open Downland* forms part of the North Wessex Downs AONB.

Key Characteristics

- Elevated plateau formed by the hard Middle and Upper Chalks. Soils are predominantly thin light, free draining calcareous and nutrient poor black or brown soils.
- Open, smoothly rolling downland, dissected by a network of dry valleys and long sinuous steep scarps.
- Sarsen stones are a locally distinctive feature.
- An expansive and simple rural landscape, with strong sweeping skylines with a strong sense of exposure and remoteness.
- A landscape largely devoid of water due to the porosity of the chalk bedrock.
- Dominated by intensively managed arable farmland with a few hedgerows and occasional wooded areas. Woodlands are virtually absent apart from the occasional linear shelterbelt and distinctive beech clumps crowning the summits.
- Varied field patterns including 'ladder' fields and large rectangular fields.
- Extensive, isolated blocks of chalk grassland survive along the steep scarp slopes and dry valley sides.
- Very sparsely populated, generally restricted to scattered farms and equestrian establishments contributing to strong sense of isolation.
- Varied built character including traditional knapped flint and brick, timber framed weather-boarded aisled barns and large scale modern farm buildings.
- Numerous tracks, byways, green lanes and drove roads.
- Strong cultural resonance with visible features from many periods of history, but with particularly strong associations with the prehistoric in the form of dramatic visible field monuments.

Physical Influences

The *Open Downlands* are defined by their elevation, with steep scarp slopes rising abruptly to form an expansive rolling plateau at 200-300m AOD. Cretaceous Middle and Upper Chalk form the main body of the plateau. Isolated deposits of Clay with Flint overlie the higher outcrops, such as Hackpen Hill, and Alluvium forms the base of the many of the dry valleys that dissect the area.

Soils are predominantly thin light, free draining calcareous and nutrient poor with deeper soils in coombes and dry valleys. It is a landscape largely devoid of water due to the porosity of the chalk bedrock.

Sarsen stones occur across the *Marlborough Downs* and are particularly outstanding at Fyfield and Piggledene, which have been designated SSSIs.

Biodiversity

The *Open Downlands* are predominantly under arable cultivation. Despite this significant ecological interest has been retained, including ecologically rich arable land, together with a number of nationally important and numerous locally important calcareous grassland and woodland sites.

Extensive areas of chalk grassland characterise the steep uncultivated slopes.

Pewsey Down is considered one of the finest examples of chalk downland in southern England. It has been designated a SSSI and a SAC, holding a very significant population of the scarce early gentian (*Gentianella anglica*). Four other areas of chalk grassland have been designated SSSIs at: Morgan's Hill; Roundway Down & Covert; Calstone and Cherhill Downs and King's Play Hill.

Fyfield Down an SSSI and Piggledene SSSI are designated due to their unique combination of geomorphological, biological and archaeological features. The sites have the finest collection of sarsen stones in Britain, supporting a rich lichen and moss flora. Many of these lichen species are very rare in southern Britain, and some are found only on this particular type of stone. Fyfield Down also supports a range of grassland communities; the majority of these are neutral, but pockets of both calcareous and acid grass occur throughout the site.

County Wildlife Sites include three grassland sites: Cherhill Down, a large field adjacent to Cherhill Hill monument with areas of species rich chalk grassland - chalk indicator species present include Lady's bedstraw and Chalk milkwort; Barbury Castle North, the site of a hill fort covered with rank grassland that is known for Adonis Blue and Chalkhill Blue butterflies; and Knoll Chalk, unmanaged chalk grassland that supports a good range of chalk loving butterfly species such as Adonis Blue. A woodland County Wildlife Site is Blakes Copse, secondary woodland and plantation with mature oak/ash over derelict hazel and maple coppice with a rich ground flora that includes Greater stitchwort and Enchanter's nightshade.

Historic environment

The *Open Downlands* have numerous sites of historic and archaeological interest. This landscape type is particularly notable for its concentration of Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments. Long mounds and round barrows, forming part of the wider Avebury complex,

are located on the higher ground, clearly visible on the skyline. However many monuments have been ploughed flat and although visible on aerial photographs, they are no longer a recognisable landscape feature. There are also standing stones at Down Barn.

Throughout the Bronze Age the Downs landscape witnessed intensification of occupation resulting in widespread deforestation and enclosure. Concentrations of ancient field systems survive on the downs and are visible as slight earthworks. Iron Age activity included the construction of several hill forts such as at Barbury Castle, Liddington Castle, Oldbury and Martinsell Hill, all strategically located at the summit of the scarps commanding panoramic views and visible as skyline features.

Important examples of medieval archaeology include the deserted medieval settlements at Shaw, Upham and Snap, and the remains of smaller settlements such as Raddun on Overton Down. On Fyfield Down, there is also evidence of ridge and furrow, which is relatively rare on chalk downland and here the example is associated with a medieval settlement.

One of the most remarkable features of the chalk landscape, the date of which is unknown, is the many chalk figures. Several chalk horses have been drawn on the steep scarp slopes.

Today the *Open Downland* is characterised by its very open landscape, created by formal, post-medieval Parliamentary enclosure fields. There are also many recent gallops and rides established over parts of the downs.

Settlement and built character

There is very little settlement in the *Open Downlands* landscape type with development limited to a scattering isolated farmsteads and a handful of remote rural villages located on winterbournes. Building materials and styles are varied with brick and flint and brick and sarsen common. There are also several horse gallops and stables associated with the horse racing industry on the higher ground.

CHARACTER AREAS

IA: Horton Downs

Horton Down comprises a relatively simple chalk upland landform of open rolling downland dissected by dry valleys and coombes. It is a large scale landscape of extreme openness with strong ridgelines and wide expansive skies. The southern scarp above the Vale of Pewsey is a dramatic feature with scalloped steep slopes towering above the vale, crowned by hills with a distinctive rounded profile. Landcover is almost exclusively arable apart from the extensive areas of important herb rich calcareous grassland on the steep scarp slopes. The area is rich in sites of historic interest, including numerous Neolithic long barrows and Bronze Age round barrows on the higher ground, with hillforts strategically located on the scarp summit overlooking the Vale of Pewsey. There are also dramatic White Horses such as the one cut into the scarp edge overlooking the Vale of Pewsey and another located on the western scarp slope. The Ridgeway and Wansdyke are both important historic linear features originating on Morgan's Hill on the western edge of the area. Settlement in the areas is limited to a scattering of isolated farmsteads, and the small village of Calstone Wellington. Roads tend to pass through the area rather than lead into it, such as the A361, which crosses the downs and the A4, which defines the northern edge of the character area, both of which are visually and audibly intrusive.

IB: Marlborough Downs

The *Marlborough Downs* forms an expansive landscape of smoothly rolling downland, mostly under arable cultivation. Internally, the landform is topographically complex and includes the dramatic long sinuous scarps interlocking gently rounded summits such as Overton Down and Ogbourne Down, with the intersecting valleys. Barbury Hill (268m) and other elevated points along the top of the northern escarpment provide distant views across the adjacent lower lying vale.

This is a very open landscape with long views, revealing the subtle curves and undulations of the underlying landform. The absence of field boundaries and woodland, combined with the elevation, creates a remote character. To the east of the Og valley land cover is more diverse with scattered woodland blocks within arable farmland. Distinctive features include the beech clumps which crown the open summits. The Marlborough Downs have strong cultural resonance visibly expressed by the sarsen stones, round barrows and hill forts. The sarsen stones, scattered across the landscape at Fyfield Down and Overton Down are an outstanding feature. Surviving areas of permanent pasture are concentrated along the scarp slopes to the north and west of the area, with some sections of the scarp slope beginning to be covered by regenerating scrub.

The Ridgeway, an important prehistoric route runs along the top of the northern escarpment. The downs are very sparsely settled with Baydon on a scarp edge in the north-east part of the Downs and the tiny clustered hamlets of Rockley and Upper Upham sheltering in dry valleys. The larger nucleated settlement of Aldbourne is isolated, nestled at the head of a winterbourne valley. Elsewhere settlement is limited to occasional isolated farms, with a concentration of equestrian establishments and gallops on the western part of the downs. Traditional building materials include brick, flint, sarsen and clunch with roofs of thatch or clay tile.

EVALUATION

Positive landscape features of significance

- Large scale open landscape with little settlement and sweeping skylines
- Strong sense of remoteness and isolation
- Important tracts of chalk grassland along the steep scarp slopes and dry valley sides, several of which have been designated SSSIs
- Numerous sites of immense historic interest with field monuments particularly relating to the Neolithic and Bronze Age
- Dramatic chalk-cut white horses
- Distinctive beech clumps
- Occurrence of Sarsen stone, with important lichen and moss colonies.

Forces for change

- In the past intensive arable agriculture has resulted in loss of biodiversity (chalk grassland) and ploughing up of important historic monuments. Schemes such as the Environmental Stewardship Scheme aim to make farming techniques more sustainable.
- Further reduction in livestock, so that there is no longer the means to maintain existing areas of pasture. Some marginal areas are regenerating with scrub.
- Requirements for new large scale farm buildings plus other farm units becoming redundant with potential for conversion.
- Demand for new crops and land uses which would break up the simple open landscape.
- Climate change may affect the distinctive beech clumps crowning the open summits with changes in the level of the water table impacting on the health of these shallow rooted trees.
- Potential impact of tall structures - communications masts and transmitters plus future renewable energy developments (wind turbines) that will be particularly intrusive on the strong sweeping skylines and could have a major impact on the sense of remoteness.
- Small scale incremental development (signage, fencing, road improvements) that would impinge on the simple, open character.

Condition

The *Open Downlands* are an intensively managed landscape type, with vast swathes of arable farmland. There are however several extensive surviving areas of chalk grassland, which have been recognised for their importance and designated as SSSIs. There are also numerous sites of historic interest; several protected as scheduled ancient monuments, although in the past a number of sites have been lost through ploughing and are not visible on the ground. The overall condition of the landscape is perceived to be **moderate**.

Strength of character

This is a landscape of **strong** character. The steep scarps rise up to form an extensive plateau of rolling chalk downland. The distinctive landform, simple arable land cover, absence of settlement and large skies create a landscape with a sense of remoteness and exposure. The strong character also relates to the historic associations visible in the form of dramatic field monuments, extensive areas of chalk grassland and special features such as the chalk cut figures and concentrations of sarsen stones.

Inherent landscape sensitivities

- The sense of remoteness and isolation.
- Areas rich in arable biodiversity, unimproved chalk and neutral grassland found on the steeper slopes which are an important ecological and landscape resource.
- Clumps of trees crowning the hilltops forming prominent landscape features.

- Surviving historic monuments are sensitive to intensive agricultural practices
- The openness of the downland plateau and long views have a high visual sensitivity to change
- Strong skylines and scarp tops are also particularly visually sensitive

Strategy

The overall strategy *Open Downland* Landscape Type is to **conserve** the inherent remoteness, isolation and simplicity of the downland landscape and its important ecological, historic and geological features.

Broad Management Objectives

- Conserve the sense of remoteness and isolation, with sparse settlement and road network and limited visible development.
- Conserve the areas of chalk grassland and pasture, encourage management to improve species diversity and prevent scrub encroachment. Consider opportunities for extending and linking chalk grassland along the scarps and dry valley sides, and creating mosaics of chalk grassland and ecologically rich arable land.
- Manage gallops to favour chalk grassland species and minimise the use of intrusive fencing or signage.
- Protect the remaining sites of historic interest and above ground archaeological features. Consider opportunities for extending areas of pasture around archaeological monuments.
- Minimise small scale incremental change such as signage, fencing or improvements to the road network which could change the simple open character of the landscape.

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER CONTEXT

The character of the Wiltshire landscape has already been investigated in a number of studies as detailed in Appendices 1 and 2.

The Kennet District Council Landscape Character Assessment describes the *Open Downland* Landscape Type through areas '2: Horton Down' and '4: Marlborough Down'

The North Wessex Down AONB describes the *Open Downland* Landscape Type through type '1: Open Downland' and the character areas '1C: Horton Downs' and '1A: Marlborough Down'.