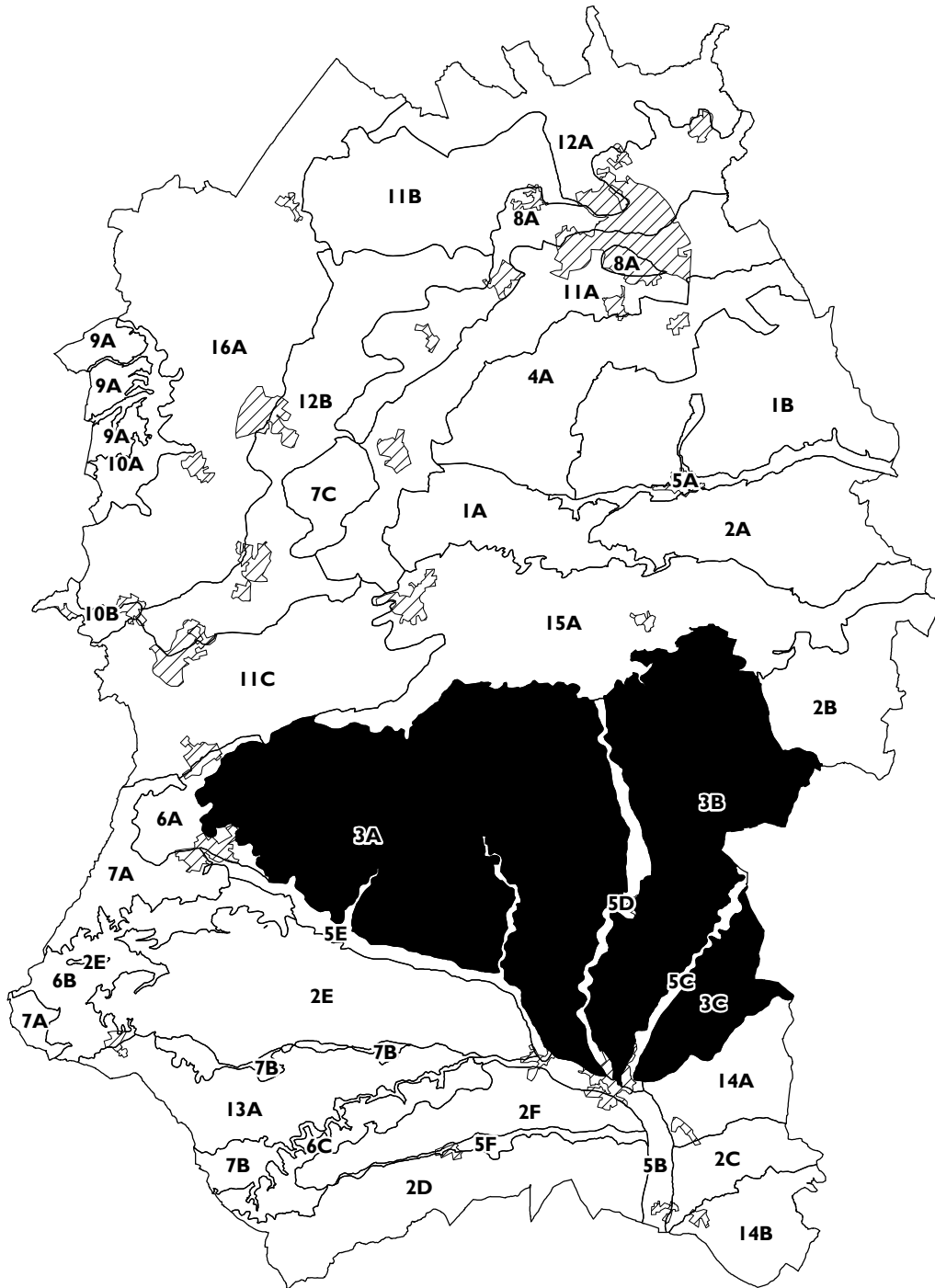


# LANDSCAPE TYPE 3: HIGH CHALK PLAIN

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# 3: HIGH CHALK PLAIN



## LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREAS

- 3A** Salisbury Plain West
- 3B** Salisbury Plain East
- 3C** Porton Down
-  Urban Area

# TYPE 3: HIGH CHALK PLAIN

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## DESCRIPTION

### Location and Boundaries

The *High Chalk Plain* Landscape Type forms a large area of central Wiltshire, over a wide band of Upper Chalk Formation. The boundaries are defined by changes in topography to the north, west and south where water courses have created valleys, and a change in land cover to the east where woodland is more prevalent. The county boundary constrains the area of study to the east.

There are three Character Areas within this landscape type, divided by river valleys. 3A: *Salisbury Plain West* is the largest and most westerly area, 3B: *Salisbury Plain East* is the central area and 3C: *Porton Down* is to the east.

A large proportion of the *High Chalk Plain* Landscape Type is Ministry of Defence (MOD) land, with restricted public access.

### Key Characteristics

- Very large scale and open, exposed landscape.
- Rolling plateau land form with panoramic views over the surrounding lowlands creating a sense of elevation.
- Large regular arable fields are bounded mainly by ditches or fences with occasional hedgerows.
- Steep and incised slopes down to the surrounding river valleys.
- Extensive areas of chalk grassland and scrub occur on the northern and central parts of the area under military ownership with arable farmland around the periphery.
- Copses and woodland belts, at various stages of growth occur throughout the area with sinuous older plantations contrasting with more recent tree planting in geometrical blocks.
- Proliferation of military signage and posts along the numerous tracks that cross the area.
- Rich ecology particularly the numerous extensive and intact areas of chalk grassland.
- Archaeological remains and sites of historic importance, particularly the Neolithic monuments of Stonehenge and Old Sarum.
- Settlement limited to a scattering of small villages and military installations including camps and abandoned or specially constructed villages used by the army for training operations.

## Physical Influences

The *High Chalk Plain* Landscape Type sits on a belt of chalk from the Upper Cretaceous period that runs east to west across the county. The majority of the area comprises of Upper Chalk with Middle Chalk and Lower Chalk occurring on the steep slopes and at the base of slopes respectively. Steep scarp slopes rise to form an upstanding plateau, with wide flat areas incised by a complex network of dry valleys forming an expansive rolling landscape. Small isolated areas of Clay with Flint and Sandstone also occur. The underlying chalk geology has led to the predominance of free draining calcareous soils, and a lack of surface water. The landform undulates between 100m and 230m AOD.

## Biodiversity

The *High Chalk Plains* Landscape Type is rich in areas of high ecological value and offers a range of habitats including extensive areas nationally rare chalk grassland, a habitat that has seen an 80% decline over the last 50 years. The long established military land use has contributed to these ecologically important areas. Within the Type there are 13 SSSI. Three of these areas are of European significance, with additional SAC designations. Two of these, Salisbury Plain and Porton Down, are also SPAs; while the other site, Parsonage Down is also a NNR. There are also several County Wildlife Sites around the periphery of the military area and a number beech and ancient woodland remnants throughout.

Salisbury plain, designated as a SSSI, SAC and SPA, covers approximately 12933ha in three areas spread over the northern part of the *High Chalk Plain* Landscape Type. The purchase of land for military use at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has protected the area from intensive farming methods, allowing over 100 years of chalk grassland re-colonisation. Today the diverse range of calcareous soil types support a wide range of grassland communities including 13 species of nationally rare plants. The Plain is an important habitat for invertebrates, with 67 rare and scarce species recorded. It is also an internationally important site for birds, offering important breeding and wintering grounds for a number of species, including six listed in the Red Data Book.

Porton Down, designated as a SSSI, SAC and SPA, is located to the east of the Type and extends beyond the county border. Porton Down is also a significant tract of ungrazed and uninterrupted calcareous grassland and includes nationally rare colonies and species. The Down also has several broadleaved, mixed and coniferous plantations and around 20% of the southern English population of Juniper scrub. The range of habitats supports a diverse range of species, some internationally important, including lichens, fungus, flies, snails, beetles, butterflies, deer and birds.

Parsonage Down SSSI, SAC and NNR is again an area of botanically rich chalk grassland, situated to the west of Shrewton and outside of the MOD controlled land.

The more isolated areas of species rich calcareous grassland and Juniper scrub designated as SSSI, include; Yarnbury Castle SSSI, Steeple Langford Down SSSI, Starveall and Stoney Down SSSI, Scratchbury and Cotley Hill SSSI, Upton Cow Down SSSI, Bratton Down SSSI, Great Cheveral Hill, Figsbury Ring SSSI, Bracknell Croft SSSI and Cockey Down SSSI.

County Wildlife Sites include: The Warren, mixed plantation woodland on steep valley sides with open fen and a watercourse at the valley bottom and white helleborine, broad-leaved helleborine, ploughman's-spikenard, adders tongue and water crowfoot present; White Hill,

three enclosures with a complex system of terraces and access track-ways crossing them - the slopes are unimproved chalk grassland; and Codford Down, a large area of chalk downland with visible signs of old field systems with species present including black medick, burnet saxifrage and glaucous sedge, and brown hare.

### **Historic environment**

The *High Chalk Plain* Landscape Type has many sites of historic and archaeological importance. The military use has contributed to preserving a number of archaeological sites from the Prehistoric and Roman periods that would have otherwise been lost through ploughing. Whole archaeological landscapes survive in this landscape type largely undisturbed by any activity following the Roman period. The military training area east of the River Avon has the biggest concentration of Bronze Age burial mounds in Europe. This prehistoric landscape exhibits signs of consensus relating to its use. Large areas are devoted to agriculture and others on which agriculture was clearly excluded are dedicated to burial practices.

The most significant concentration of sites is Stonehenge World Heritage Site (WHS), recognised for its heritage of international value by UNESCO in 1986. Although the famous stone circle is the most recognisable feature, the WHS covers an area of around 2600ha, protecting the site and setting of a number of Neolithic monuments including; Woodhenge, another henge monument; the Cursus, consisting of two straight banks and ditches 90-130 metres apart running 2.8 kilometres and several barrows. Barrows dating from Neolithic and early Bronze Age periods are a frequent occurrence across this landscape with over 700 on the protected MOD land alone.

To the south of the type, close to Salisbury is the site of the Neolithic settlement of Old Sarum. Established during the Iron Age around 500bc the site was occupied successively by the Romans and Saxons, although the most important developments occurred during Norman occupation. A castle, palace and cathedral were built inside a network of earthwork but the settlement started to fade with the establishment of New Sarum, the latter day Salisbury in 1226.

The area was extensively settled throughout the Iron Age and Roman periods. Significant sites include the Iron Age forts of Yarnbury Castle, Sidbury Hill, Figsbury Ring and Scratchbury Hillfort and earthworks associated with a Roman settlement on Charlton Down. There are some six Roman villages surviving intact on Salisbury Plain including street and house platforms surviving as clear earthworks.

In 1897 the first land was purchased for military training purposes and by 1902 the majority of the 17,400ha that is now the MOD controlled Army Training Estate – Salisbury Plain was under military ownership. The protection offered by the military zoning has had a profound affect on the modern landscape. Outside the MOD land large arable fields indicative of recent enclosure are dominant.

### **Settlement and built character**

Settlement within the *High Chalk Plain* Landscape Type is sparse, limited to nucleated villages, military camps and isolated farmsteads. The highest concentration of development is to the east of the area with a cluster of villages around the settlements of Tidworth and Ludgershall in the Bourne valley. Other settlement is widely dispersed, such as the isolated village of

Tilshead and the parkland estate of Everleigh. Scattered throughout, but usually to the periphery of the MOD land are isolated brick farmsteads occupied by the tenant farmers tending to cattle that are allowed to graze in specified areas of the military zone. Most settlement within the locality is, however, confined to the river valleys (Landscape Type 5: Chalk River Valleys) that divide the *High Chalk Plain*, occasionally spilling out on to the plain as at Amesbury.

'Attached' to and dwarfing some of the villages are the military camps of Tidworth, Bulford and Netheravon. There are also several freestanding camps such as Larkhill and New Zealand Camp. The camps, surrounded by wire fences, are often constructed of modern brick, weatherboard and corrugated iron. Although the camps are highly visible in some areas of the landscape their large scale, muted colours and utilitarian construction are in keeping with a landscape that has been so heavily influenced by its military land use. There are also several other military developments including the large Boscombe Down airfield, several artillery ranges and a replica German village. The military presence is also evident in the numerous signs and white topped posts clustered around track junctions and areas with restricted access such as the firing ranges or the historic sites.

As the majority of the area is controlled by the MOD, transport routes are limited and generally pass through the area to connect the settlements in the river valleys. The busy A303 also passes through the area east/west. Within the MOD land there is a sparse network of rough tracks that are inaccessible to the public.

## **CHARACTER AREAS**

### **3A: Salisbury Plain West**

*Salisbury Plain West* is by far the largest of the character areas of the *High Chalk Plain* Landscape Type. The vast High Chalk plateau rises with steep scarp slopes from the river valleys that define its southern and eastern edges and the greensand to the north. Although it is incised by numerous dry valleys, the rolling, expansive and exposed landscape retains its continuity. Although the majority of the area is controlled by the MOD there is restricted public access. The boundary between the military land and the farmland is distinct. The MOD land, a wide band to the north of the area, is almost exclusively calcareous grass land with the different grass communities arising from local conditions giving subtle variations throughout. Woodland clumps, some ancient, and small plantations at various stages of growth are also scattered across the downs, apart from the north east of the area which is used as an impact area for weapons and is exclusively grassland. The areas outside MOD control are predominantly intensively farmed and arable. The large fields and lack of hedgerow retains the openness of the area but the landscape has a more 'manicured' feel. The lack of settlement, limited to the small village of Tilshead and a couple of military camps, accentuates the feeling of remoteness and isolation. Views within the area can be distant, looking across vast areas of grassland and views from the periphery of the area are often panoramic, overlooking the surrounding lowlands. Military installations, signage and posts occur throughout the area. An abundance of historic sites from the Neolithic period is also a characteristic of this area, including the World Heritage Site Stonehenge and several hundred barrows.

### **3B: Salisbury Plain East**

*Salisbury Plain East* is an area of High Chalk Plain rising up from the river valleys to the east and west. As with other areas within the *High Chalk Plain Landscape Type*, a vast proportion of the area is MOD land and has not been cultivated for many years, allowing for large scale calcareous grassland recolonisation of high ecological value. Juniper scrub is frequent throughout the area, as are clumps of trees and some more extensive areas of woodland, such as Everleigh Ashes. In recent years however, there has been some extensive tree clearance particularly in connection with the Life project to restore and manage the calcareous grassland. Settlement is more apparent in this area than the other areas of the *High Chalk Plain Landscape Type*. Two large military camps at Bulford and Tidworth extend up out of the Nine Mile and Bourne Valleys. There is also a group of settlements to the east of the area including Ludgershall and Tidworth. Other military sites include rifle ranges and Boscombe Down Airfield which occupies a large area of flat ground to the south of the area. Sites of historic and archaeological interest are frequent throughout the area, including the Iron Age fort on Sidbury Hill. Despite the settlement and areas of woodland which create some more intimate areas, *Salisbury Plain East* retains its vast scale and sense of isolation and exposure.

### **3C: Porton Down**

The smallest area within the *High Chalk Plain Landscape Type*, *Porton Down* is an area of High Chalk that straddles the Wiltshire border to the west of the county. The area is effectively divided into two by the A30. North of the A30 the MOD land is predominantly calcareous grassland with some scattered clumps of trees and is relatively inaccessible. South of the A30 the land is generally in private ownership and is arable with a more formal network of hedgerows and trees creating a more intimate and less exposed landscape.

## **EVALUATION**

### **Positive landscape features of significance**

- Large scale open and exposed landscape.
- Strong sense of remoteness and isolation accentuated by absence of settlement.
- Wide views across the plain and out over the surrounding lowlands.
- Extensive areas of uninterrupted calcareous grassland with juniper scrub and of high ecological value.
- Scattered woodlands and plantations.
- Outstanding sites of archaeological interest; numerous sites, many of international importance including Stonehenge (WHS).
- Twentieth century military history evident in features such as the “German” village, disused tanks, distinctive signage, posts and gates on the rough tracks and roads.

## Forces for change

- Changes in military activity potentially leading to alterations to the management of the calcareous grassland, Juniper scrub and the woodland blocks.
- In the past intensive arable agriculture has resulted in loss of biodiversity (chalk grassland) and ploughing up of important historic monuments.
- Further amalgamation and enlargement of fields and the breakdown of traditional field boundaries associated with intensive farming practices.
- LIFE project impacts (aims to restore and management of the calcareous grassland).
- Management of military plantations.
- Managing high visitor numbers to key archaeological sites – potential effects on the historic landscape and need for supporting infrastructure.
- Potential impact of tall structures - communications masts and transmitters plus future renewable energy developments (wind turbines) that will be particularly intrusive on the skylines and could have a major impact on the sense of remoteness.

## Condition

The MOD controlled areas within the Type are subject to military activity but this land use has also maintained large areas of the *Chalk High Plain Landscape Type* in good condition. The chalk grassland is maintained through rotational grazing by tenant farmers, there is active clearance of invasive scrub and the sites of archaeological interest are protected. The non-MOD areas have seen a loss of biodiversity through the intensification of arable farming methods for instance the removal of hedgerows, however the overall condition of the *Chalk High Plain Landscape Type* is **good**.

## Strength of character

This is a landscape of **strong** character. A sense of the vast scale and openness of this landscape is present throughout both the MOD controlled and farmed areas. The lack of settlement accentuates the feeling of isolation and remoteness and numerous and widespread sites of historic and ecological interest enrich that character of the landscape.

## Inherent landscape sensitivities

- The open, exposed and isolated nature of the plain.
- Internationally important ecological resources in the vast areas of uninterrupted chalk grassland.
- Ecologically significant areas of arable biodiversity, Juniper scrub and ancient woodland
- Numerous sites of archaeological interest.
- The long views and openness of the level plateau have a high visual sensitivity to change.



- Skylines and tops of the scarp slopes are also particularly visually sensitive.

### **Strategy**

The management strategy for the *High Chalk Plain* Landscape Type is to **conserve** the open and isolated character of the plain along with the vast areas of calcareous grass land and sites of historic interest.

### **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, arable biodiversity, Juniper scrub and ancient woodland of high ecological value.
- Explore opportunities to reinstate buffer areas of chalk grassland around the arable fields but ensuring retention of arable interest.
- Protect the sites of historic interest and archaeological features. Consider opportunities for extending areas of pasture around archaeological monuments in the arable areas.

## **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 *High Chalk Plain* Landscape Type has, in part, been covered by the Army Training Estates – Salisbury Plain Landscape Character Assessment.