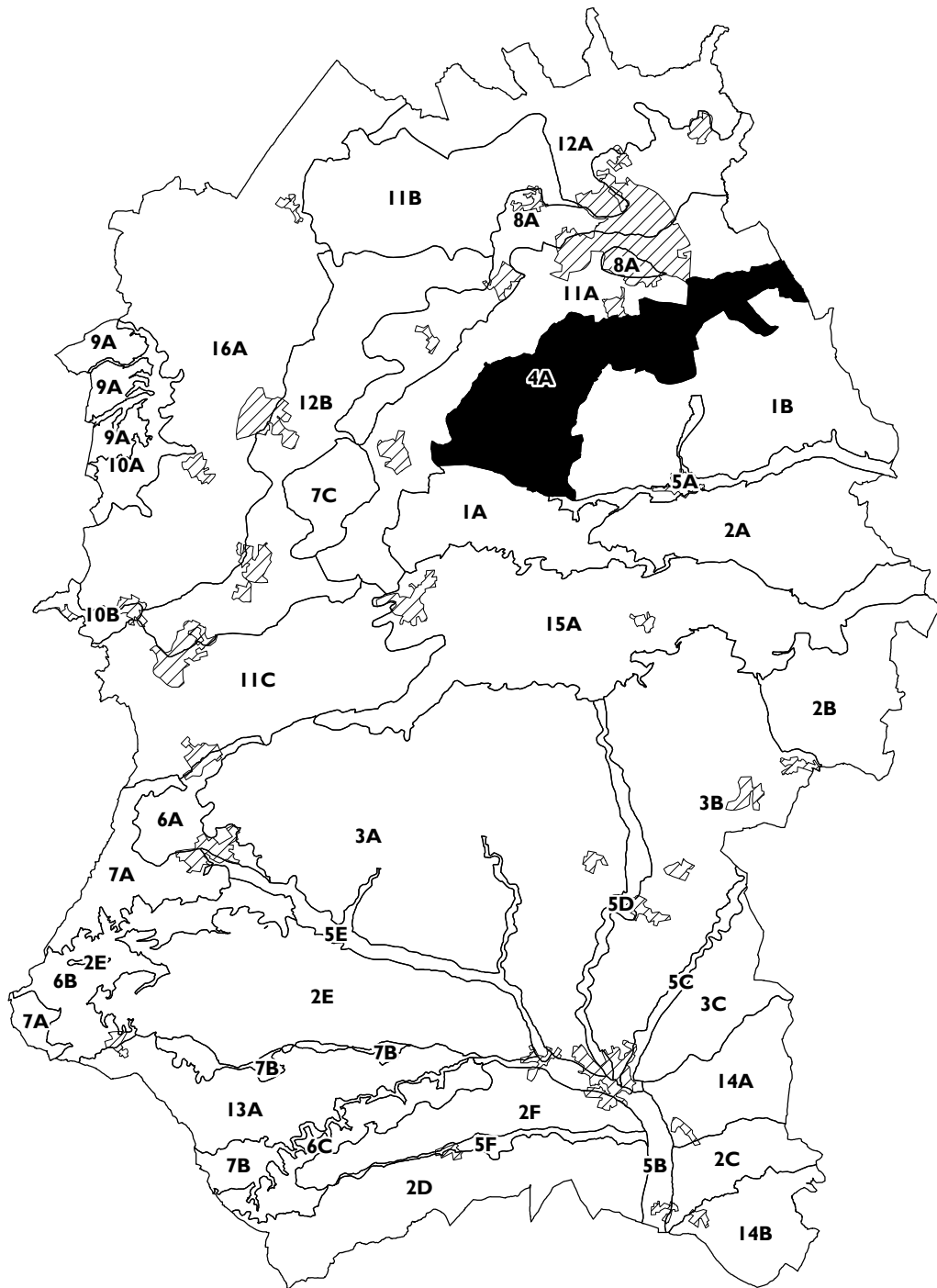


LANDSCAPE TYPE 4: LOW CHALK PLAIN AND SCARP



4: LOW CHALK PLAIN AND SCARP



LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREAS

4A Avebury Plain



Urban Area

TYPE 4: LOW CHALK PLAIN AND SCARP

DESCRIPTION

Location and boundaries

The *Low Chalk Plain and Scarp* Landscape Type is a ledge of Lower Chalk that extends to the north and west of the *Open Downlands*. Defined by the underlying geology, the boundaries of the area to the south and southeast follow the base of the scarp marking the edge of the *Open Downlands*, with the northern boundary running along the base of a steep northern scarp slope at the junction with the clay vales.

The *Low Chalk Plain and Scarp* landscape type has just one character areas: 4A: *Avebury Plain*. The type forms the north-eastern extent of the North Wessex Downs AONB.

Key characteristics

- Level almost flat plain underlain by the eroded surface of the Lower Chalk.
- Steep northern scarp slope down to the clay vales forms a dramatic landform feature, defining the north and west boundary.
- Open and exposed landscape with long view to the strong skyline formed by the higher chalk downlands to the south and west plus some views across low lying clay vales to the north.
- Intimate mosaic of pasture, parkland and woodland on the scarp contrasts with the large-scale open arable plain.
- Regular large arable fields with very little tree or hedgerow cover dominate the plain.
- On Avebury Plain a unique complex of Neolithic monuments and archaeological sites of international importance.
- Small springline villages on the northern scarp plus settlement nestled within the Upper Kennet Valley. Elsewhere the plain is sparsely settled.
- Airfields and redundant military sites are concentrated on the plain to the north.

Physical influences

The *Lower Chalk Plain and Scarp* is defined by the underlying geology, forming a flat shelf and steep scarp slope. The shelf is underlain by the eroded surface of Lower Chalk, a softer clayey substrate compared with the hard pure white Middle and Upper Chalk of the *Open Downlands*. The southern section of the area is broad and fairly open but as the area narrows to the north the prominence of Marlborough Down creates a more enclosed character. The area appears virtually flat at approximately 190m AOD, although, it slopes gently towards Avebury to the southeast of the area, following the very shallow alluvial valley of the Upper Kennet.

To the north, the scarp, defining the northwest boundary descends steeply to the heavy Gault Clays and Greensands of the surrounding vales forming a dramatic landform feature and highly visible horizon. The steep slopes are incised by numerous coombes.

Biodiversity

The steep chalk scarp, along with its coombes and valleys, contains a large number of important chalk grasslands. The western part of the scarp is extensively wooded with linear 'hanger' woodlands clinging to the steep ground along the scarp, as well as smaller wooded coombes. Estate land is also a feature of the scarp and these areas, with their trees and hedged fields also create a wooded character. Woodlands vary greatly according to the local conditions and include beech hangers and ancient semi natural ash and hazel coppice with oak, and wet ash-maple woodland on lower slopes. The mosaic of farmland, woodland and remnant areas of chalk grassland habitat, all in close proximity, makes the scarp a rich ecological resource.

By contrast the flat shelf forming the main part of the *Lower Chalk Plain and Scarp* is intensively farmed, dominated by large and open arable areas with very little hedge, scrub or tree cover, limiting biodiversity. Several small pockets of woodland and grassland have however, survived. Of particular note is Silbury Hill SSSI, a nationally important area of semi-natural chalk grassland that has established on an artificial earthwork hill constructed several thousand years ago.

County Wildlife Sites include Avebury Henge, sheep grazed Neolithic earthworks with areas of unimproved chalk grassland that support a species-rich sward with spring sedge and Stanmore Copse, a native broadleaved plantation with remaining areas of ancient semi-natural woodland with species such as small-leaved lime, broad-leaved helleborine and red current present.

Historic environment

The *Low Chalk Plain and Scarp* is notable for the outstanding collection of Neolithic monuments, many of which are of international importance. The highest concentration of monuments is located to the south of the area around Avebury, which with Stonehenge, was recognised in 1986 by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. Bronze Age Round Barrows are a further prominent feature.

The area along the Upper Kennet Valley and the scarp became increasingly settled though the medieval period with some surviving as villages today such as Winterbourne Monkton as well as deserted medieval villages.

To a large extent, traditional field patterns have given way to large open arable for intensive farming methods. Long and sinuous fields are however evident in the more intimate landscape of the scarp and in the Upper Kennet Valley, where permanent pasture is more prominent.

Settlement and built character

Settlement within the *Low Chalk Plain and Scarp* is limited to string of small clustered villages following the shallow valley of the Kennet to Avebury, spring line villages along the northern scarp, plus more modern development on the plain at Chiseldon and Overtown. Also located to the north of the area is the military development at Wroughton including an airfield, the associated hangers and a now disused military hospital.

Building materials are varied, including sarsen stone, apparently taken from the stone circles, flint, render and brick with clay tiles and thatch roofing. Views over the large urban area of Swindon from the elevated plain are prominent in the north of the type, reducing the sense of remoteness found elsewhere.

CHARACTER AREAS

4A: Avebury Plain

The flat level surface of the plain is intensively cultivated and is characterised by expanses of large open arable fields, with boundaries formed by fences or thin lines of trimmed hawthorn, creating long views and an open, exposed character. The northern part of the area has a greater degree of enclosure with a stronger hedge pattern plus a number of small copses and shelterbelts. The shallow Upper Kennet valley contains permanent pasture along the valley floor in association with hedgerows and small copses. Silbury Hill is located in the southern part of the valley, forming a prominent feature and containing important surviving areas of chalk grassland. In stark contrast to the open plain is the steep northern scarp slope distinguished by long sinuous belts of woodland clinging to the almost vertical upper slopes forming a wooded skyline and infilling the coombes cut into the slope. A mix of pasture and parkland predominates on the lower slopes.

Central to the character of the area are the monuments associated with Avebury World Heritage Site (WHS), which are locally prominent and imbue the wider landscape with a sense of antiquity and historical continuity. They include Avebury Henge and Stone Circles, West Kennet Avenue, Windmill Hill and Silbury Hill. The Sanctuary on Overton Hill, which is an integral part of the archaeological complex and the WHS is included within the adjacent River Kennet Valley (5A).

Settlement is limited on the open plain confined to the Upper Kennet Valley. Avebury and Avebury Trusloe are dramatically located within and adjacent to the stone circle. Further up the valley are a series of the regularly spaced villages. Building materials include sarsen stone in conjunction with brick to create a distinctive local vernacular style.

To the north close to Swindon, the expanded scarp top settlement of Chisldon has a more modern character, and there are sizable twentieth century military developments, including Wroughton Airfield, The Ministry of Defence hospital site, and a First World War camp. The scarp also contains a number of small spring line villages.

EVALUATION

Positive landscape features of significance

- Large-scale open character of the plain and the contrasting small-scale, intimate wooded and pastoral scarp slopes.
- Outstanding archaeological landscape centred on Avebury, with unique complex of Neolithic monuments (WHS).
- Long, almost continuous tracts of ancient woodland along the defining the crest of the steep scarp.

- Surviving areas of permanent pasture on the scarp slope and in the shallow valley cut by the Upper Kennet.
- Parklands and estates on the scarp.
- Small scale settlements associated with the Kennet Valley and spring line villages on the scarp.

Forces for change

- The conversion of remaining grassland sites to arable farming, notably pasture remaining on the scarp slopes. The reduction in grazing livestock has resulted in some areas no longer being grazed and encroachment of scrub.
- Further amalgamation and enlargement of fields and the breakdown of traditional field boundaries associated with intensive farming practices.
- Managing high visitor numbers – potential effects on the historic landscape and need for supporting infrastructure.
- Lack of woodland management for the small ancient and semi-natural woodlands of the scarp, formerly managed by coppicing.
- Incongruous shelterbelt planting creating a discordant feature within the context of the open plain.
- Pressure for expansion of villages along the Upper Kennet Valley and the small spring line villages of the scarp plus pressures for further expansion of the settlement onto the open, unsettled plain.
- Demand for large scale development that would be highly visible within the context of the open plain and on scarp skylines.
- Pressures for redevelopment of redundant military infrastructure.

Condition

The intensively arable farmland of the *Low Chalk Plain* has led to the removal of hedgerows and the breakdown of traditional field boundaries and the loss of biodiversity. However, several areas of ecological value have survived, particularly on the steep scarp slope. The area also contains a unique collection of historic monuments protected as a World Heritage Site. Traditional settlement is contained within the Upper Kennet Valley and associated with the scarp spring line, and relates well to the landscape setting. However demand for new settlement and the military development on the more visually exposed scarp top and plain close to Swindon has had an urbanising impact. The overall condition of the *Low Chalk Plains* landscape type is therefore perceived as **moderate**.

Strength of character

The *Low Chalk Plain* landscape type has a **strong** character. The large scale open landform with expansive swathes of arable farmland contrasts with the intimate and small-scale

wooded landscape of the scarp slope. Numerous Neolithic monuments and remaining areas of ecological value add further layers of interest to the landscape.

Inherent landscape sensitivities

- The open and exposed character of the plain with long views.
- Intimate, small scale landscape of the scarp slope.
- Internationally important Neolithic monuments.
- Continuity of ancient woodland, defining the crest of the scarp slopes overlooking the vales to the north.
- Remaining areas of permanent pasture.
- Small scale settlement pattern relating to the scarp and valley with predominantly open unsettled plain.
- The open landscape of the plain is potentially visually sensitive to any form of large scale development, with screening opportunities limited.
- The strong wooded scarp skyline is prominent from a wide area of the lower chalk vales and is particularly visually sensitive.

STRATEGY

The overall strategy for the *Low Chalk Plain* is to **conserve** the inherent qualities of the type, such as the open visually exposed character of the plain and contrasting intimate wooded scarp, along with the important landscape features including, the historic monuments and areas of ecological values. **Restoration** of lost and/or declining features, such as the field boundaries is also important within key areas.

Broad management objectives

- Conserve the open views across the plain and the clear scarp skylines.
- Retain and manage areas of permanent pasture, particularly around areas of archaeological value, within the Upper Kennet Valley and along the scarp slope.
- Regulate grazing and recreational pressure on archaeological sites to prevent damage to monuments.
- Reinststate hedgerow boundaries and maintain the pattern of smaller fields where appropriate such as within the Upper Kennet Valley and on the scarp slope.
- Protect and manage the belts of semi-natural woodland along the scarp.
- Conserve the distinct character and pattern of settlement and resist further expansion onto the open plain.
- Conserve and enhance the setting of the World Heritage Site.

- Ensuring development opportunities associated with redundant military infrastructure respects the landscape setting.

THE 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 *Low Chalk Plains* are covered by two existing assessments, the Kennet District Landscape Character Assessment and the North Wessex Downs AONB Landscape Character Assessment.

The Kennet District Landscape Character Assessment describes a character area called '1: Avebury Plain', which covers the southern part of the area covered by *Lower Chalk Plain*, extending as far north as the district boundary. This description does not include the scarp slope.

The North Wessex Downs AONB Landscape Character Assessment includes 'Type 5: Downs Plains and Scarp', which covers the area covered by *Lower Chalk Plain* and extends beyond the county boundary. '5: Downs Plains and Scarp' however, breaks the area down into three character areas, '5A: Avebury Plain, '5B: Chiseldon – Wanborough Plain' and 5E: Clyffe Pypard – Badbury Wooded Scarp'.