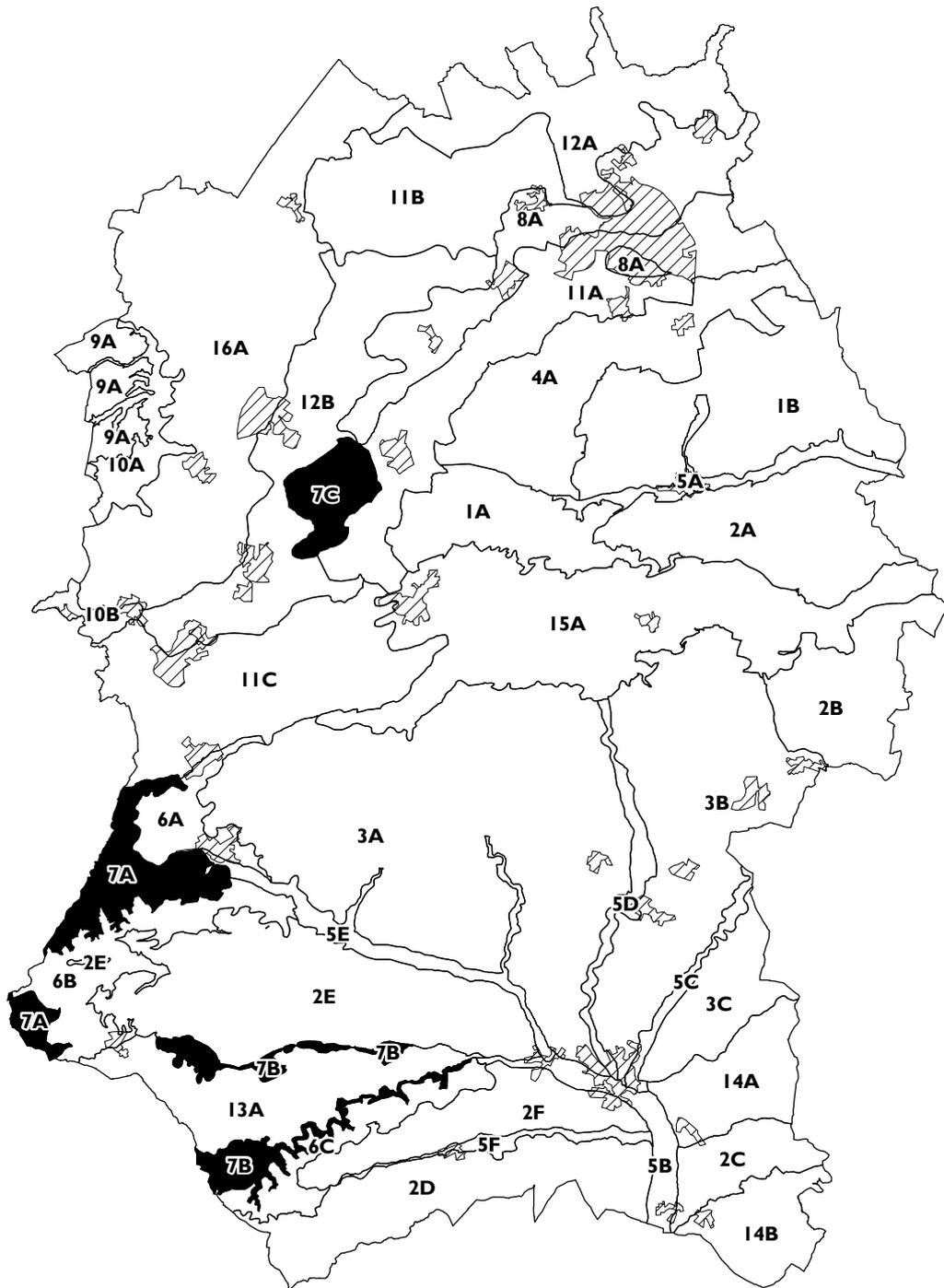


LANDSCAPE TYPE 7: WOODED GREENSAND HILLS



7: WOODED GREENSAND HILLS



LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREAS

- 7A** Longleat Stourhead Greensand Hills
- 7B** Donhead - Fovant Greensand Hills
- 7C** Bowood Greensand Hills
-  Urban Area

TYPE 7: WOODED GREENSAND HILLS

DESCRIPTION

Location and Boundaries

The *Wooded Greensand Hills* Landscape Type is a series of hills in the east of the county. There are three separate character areas within the type. *Area 7A: Longleat-Stourhead Greensand Hills* forms part of a west-facing band of Greensand that extends from outside the western boundary of the county north eastwards towards Warminster. *Area 7B: Donhead-Fovant Hills* is a series of hills wrapping around the *Vale of Wardour (13A)*. *Area 7C: Bowood Greensand Hills* is an area of rolling hills based on Lower Greensand in the centre of the county. The boundary of the *Wooded Greensand Hills* with the surrounding more level landscapes are defined by the break in slope at the bases and summits of the hills and the greater amount of woodland.

Areas *7A: Longleat-Stourhead Greensand Hills* and *7B: Donhead-Fovant Hills* are largely within the Cranborne Chase AONB.

Key characteristics

- The Greensand typically forms upstanding hills that have been eroded by tributaries of the major rivers into a series of rounded knolls and deep valleys.
- Hills support a large proportion of woodland, both deciduous and coniferous.
- Country houses and estates, set within landscaped parkland contribute to the character of the area.
- Distinctive pattern of settlement with villages of stone dwellings hidden in the shelter of the deep valleys.
- Iron age fortifications are strategically located on the hill tops.
- Ancient sunken lanes wind their way through the hills.
- Small and irregular fields characterise areas of agricultural land use.
- Meadows and wet woodland are typical of the valley floors.

Physical influences

Areas *7A* and *7B* of the *Wooded Greensand Hills* occur where the younger chalk has been eroded away to expose the Upper Greensand series of the Cretaceous period forming undulating hills at an elevation between 40 and 245m AOD. Younger layers of Upper Greensand remain at the hill tops while older rocks, including Gault, are exposed at the base of the slopes for instance at the boundary with the *Vale of Wardour (13A)*. The Upper Greensand has been eroded by rivers and streams to create a series of deep river valleys between the rounded hills for instance around Donhead St Mary where valleys have been eroded by the headwaters of the River Nadder and at Longleat where the River Frome has

had a similar effect. Greensand is a sandy rock giving rise to well drained fine loamy and silty soils that are generally well drained. Soils in the valleys tend to be loamy, clayey, slowly permeable and seasonally waterlogged.

Area 7C: *Bowood Greensand Hills* is founded on Lower Greensand overlain by calcareous grit and Oxford Clay, and the Lower Greensand has given rise to deep sandy acid soils.

Biodiversity

Woodland is widespread in the *Wooded Greensand Hills* and there is a significant proportion of ancient woodland along with other wooded habitats, such as wet woodland and acid woodland. The other main habitats of ecological interest are various types of meadow.

Four woodlands within the landscape type have statutory nature conservation designation (SSSI); Bradley Woods, Longleat Woods, Hang Wood and Gutch Common. Hang Wood (SSSI) is botanically rich woodland composed of two broad community types: wet ash and field maple woodland; and acid oak, hazel and ash woodland. The site has a history of traditional coppice management, and supports a rich associated ground flora. Bradley Woods (SSSI) is an extensive area of lowland alder woodland, with oak and hazel dominating on the drier ground. The site has largely been managed under a coppice regime, and supports a rich ground flora and an exceptional diversity of bryophytes and lichens, including several species with nationally restricted distribution. Longleat Woods (SSSI) provides a further example of a nationally important ancient woodland site found within the character area. This woodland has a high forest structure, and has developed over a range of soil conditions reflected in the diverse range of woodland stand types.

The majority of Gutch Common (SSSI) also falls within the type, and comprises a mosaic of habitat types including wet and dry acid woodland, open bracken stands and a neutral meadow. Lower Coombe and Ferne Brook Meadows (SSSI) form important examples of fen meadow and neutral meadow.

Spye Park (SSSI) is an extensive habitat mosaic comprising large expanses of some of the finest undisturbed alder woods in the county, along with oak woods, parkland and an area of dry acidic grassland containing several locally uncommon plants. Rich communities of lichens, bryophytes and vascular plants flourish in the wet soil conditions prevailing over much of the park.

County Wildlife Sites in this type include two woodland sites: Stourhead Woods, Convent & Castle Woods, a coniferous woodland with remnant corridors of wet alder woodland along streams and flushes which have retained a rich ground flora of ancient woodland vascular plants and bryophytes; and Great Bradley Woods, a large and variable woodland on a steep slope which is partly ancient semi-natural vegetation with an extremely rich ground flora including golden scaly male fern, tutsan and early purple orchid. The site has an extensive ride system and a large glade with breeding marsh fritillary butterflies and ivy-leaved bellflower.

Historic environment

Late prehistoric earthwork enclosures and hillforts such as Wick's Ball Camp and Castle Rings as well as the presence of a number of medieval and post-medieval castles indicate the strategic importance of the *Wooded Greensand Hills*. This landscape type forms the boundary between downland landscapes and vales which each offered different economic resources.

The present day wooded character of the area *7A: Longleat-Stourhead Greensand Hills* in particular reflects the originally more extensive medieval Royal Forest of Selwood Forest, while the ancient woodland in *7C: Bowood Greensand Hills* reflects the formerly expansive Chippenham Forest. The establishment in the 16th and 17th centuries of large estates and, in the following centuries, the laying out of extensive landscape parks at Longleat, Stourhead, Fonthill, Spye and Bowood has also had a dominant influence on the landscape. As well as parks there are now extensive coniferous plantations associated with these historic estates.

The dominant field pattern in the area is small and irregular and is indicative of early enclosures. Individual fields are often divided by hedgebanks and hedgerows that are generally intact.

A network of ancient sunken lanes, many enclosed by steep banks and shaded by woodland, follow the valley bottoms providing links between the low lying vales and chalk landscapes.

Settlement and built character

The frequency of settlement varies throughout the type but the pattern of villages hidden in the valleys cutting through the Upper Greensand is fairly consistent. This location provided water together with access to the downs and the lowlands. The hills also provided defensible sites as indicated by the presence of hill forts and castles. The extensive landscape parks at Longleat, Stourhead, Spye and Bowood have had a significant influence on the settlement pattern and the historic houses, their immediate gardens and parkland surrounds, together with estate woodland and farmland make a very positive contribution to the character and quality of the landscape. Typical building materials are red brick, local stone with clay roofing tiles or thatch.

CHARACTER AREAS

7A: Longleat-Stourhead Greensand Hills

The *Longleat-Stourhead Greensand Hills* are dominated by two historic estates which take up much of the area. The northern section of the area is centred on Longleat with its mansion, gardens, parkland, estate woodlands and large scale leisure developments; a Centre Parcs Holiday Village and the safari park set within (and screened by) woodland. The southern section of the character area is similarly dominated by the National Trust property of Stourhead. Despite the many visitors to these attractions the area remains largely peaceful and rural and significant parts of the *Longleat-Stourhead Hills* remain unsettled, reflecting both the gradient and the dominance of forestry. The northern section contains some more settled areas, including the south eastern edge of Warminster and southern fringes of Westbury and Ditton Marsh with some recently built red brick housing bordering the historic settlements. A few major roadways and some comparatively straight roads through the woodland plantations give a variation in character contrasting with the winding rural lanes that are more typical of the landscape type.

7B: Donhead-Fovant Greensand Hills

The *Donhead-Fovant Greensand Hills* occur as exposures of Upper Greensand around the anticline of the *Vale of Wardour (13A)*. The area is more settled than area *7A Longleat-Stourhead Greensand Hills* and follows a distinctive pattern with villages hidden in the deep valleys, or combes, which cut through the Upper Greensand at locations providing water together with access to the downs (reflected in village names such as Fovant Down and

Swallowcliffe Down) and the pastures of the *Vale of Wardour*. A network of ancient sunken lanes follow the valley bottoms providing links between the *Vale of Wardour* and adjacent chalk landscapes. Many of these lanes are enclosed by steep banks and shaded by woodland. To the north side of the *Vale of Wardour* villages such as Teffont Magna, Chilmark and Fonthill Bishop are sited at the heads of shallower valleys which drain through the Greensand to the valley below. Although landscape parks are present in the area for instance at Fonthill they are less prominent in the area than in the *Longleat-Stourhead Hills*.

7C: Bowood Greensand Hills

The *Bowood Greensand Hills* character area is less dramatic in topography than the other areas in the type, although still rising from 40 to 180m AOD with a central fairly level area, a gentle slope down to the east and a steeper slope with wide views out over the lowland to the west. The landform is varied by the many small valleys of tributaries of the River Avon and Marden. Historic houses with parklands and wooded estates dominate the area: Bowood to the north, Spye Park to the south and Bowden Park to the east. The slopes of the hills are pastoral with an intact hedgerow network, while the more level high ground has some large scale arable fields sometimes with fences. Here deciduous and coniferous shelter belts as well as the large blocks of woodland provide enclosure. Small linear villages are strung along the roads and there is a mix of estate buildings, vernacular (of stone or brick) and more modern. Two major roads cross the area and there is a sparse network of minor roads.

EVALUATION

Positive landscape features of significance

- High level of survival of small and irregular fields with indented outlines around many of the areas of woodland that is typical of early enclosure and assart incursions.
- Presence of substantial areas of ancient woodland, along with other important nature conservation habitat types including wet woodland and meadow.
- Well maintained historic estates and parkland including Longleat, Stourhead and Fonthill Abbey.
- Villages of stone dwellings nestle hidden in the shelter of the deep valleys cut through the Greensand.
- Sunken lanes, enclosed by high banks, shaded by trees and rich in wild flowers, give strongly framed views over the adjacent open vales adding to the sense of a small scale, intimate landscape.
- Prehistoric earthworks and hill forts plus medieval and post medieval castles crown the hill tops.

Forces for change

- Agricultural improvement in the past has resulted in rationalisation of an early field system of small, irregular fields into larger field units and decline of fen and neutral meadows on the valley floors.

- Some hedgerow field boundaries have been intensively flailed or lost altogether.
- There is evidence of a decline in grazing with marginal pastures (often of high environmental value) no longer actively grazed and being invaded by scrub or transferred to amenity use.
- There has been a gradual decline in traditional woodland management techniques such as coppicing with commercial forestry concentrated on coniferous species.
- Conifer blocks within deciduous woodland can be visually intrusive, particularly where they occur on skylines. The presence of coniferous coupes means rate of change in the landscape is rapid during felling of large coupes.
- Invasion of exotic species from parkland landscapes into the native woodlands is evident in some areas.
- Large numbers of visitors have exerted pressures on the landscape, bringing traffic and requirement of services, facilities and accommodation. The presence of visitor traffic has resulted in road improvements including widening, signage, and lighting.
- There are considerable pressures for new built development within the attractive villages as well as redevelopment of agricultural buildings to residential, amenity or industrial use creating broader economic activity but a change in landscape character.

Condition

The landscape possesses a high degree of intactness and integrity with good survival of historic earthwork features, survival of the typical small scale, irregular fields showing early enclosure patterns and ancient broadleaved woodland. The estates are well managed and this has an influence on the perception of the wider landscape. Built features such as the many stone built dwellings are generally in a good state of repair. However, the replanting of native woodlands by blocks of conifers has eroded the ecological condition of some of the woodlands and many hedgerows have been heavily flailed or lost altogether. The overall condition of the landscape is perceived to be **good**.

Strength of character

This is a landscape of **strong** character as a result of its distinct and recognisable pattern of elements - the rounded knolls, ancient woodland, designed parkland landscapes and ancient fortifications with villages and ancient sunken lanes hidden in the shelter of valleys. It is an instantly recognisable landscape and forms a contrast to the adjacent open chalk and clay landscapes.

Inherent landscape sensitivities

- The intact pattern of small and irregular fields typical of early enclosure and assart incursions often with ditched and banked hedgerows.
- The range of habitats of nature conservation value – substantial areas of ancient woodlands with wet woodland and meadows along the valley floors.

- Historic estates with mansions, designed landscapes, and monuments.
- Villages of local stone concealed in valleys.
- Rural sunken lanes, giving framed views to the adjacent open landscapes.
- Views to wooded hill summits and to distinctive skylines of adjacent chalk scarp tops.
- Multiplicity of ancient earthworks, hill forts and castles.

STRATEGY

The overall strategy *Wooded Greensand Hills* Landscape Type is to **conserve** the woodland, parkland and the mosaic of pastures and meadows that characterise the landscape along with the small scale villages, ancient sunken lanes and the largely intact pattern of small irregular fields bounded by ditched and banked hedgerows. Some aspects of the landscape require enhancement, in particular where hedgerows have been lost or flailed and hedgerow trees lost.

Broad Management Objectives

- Conserve the small scale pattern of irregular fields that are characteristic of the hills and consider re-planting hedgerows and hedgerow trees where these have been lost.
- Conserve and protect the remnant semi-natural habitats including the wetland habitats on the valley floor, acid woodlands and isolated areas of hay meadow. Opportunities to restore and extend these rare habitats should be considered.
- Encourage sensitive forestry practice, for example mixing different species and felling small coupes and consider removal of conifers where they are particularly visible, for example on skylines.
- Encourage sustainable woodland management of the remaining deciduous woodlands to check invasion of exotic species and encourage a healthy new generation of woodland trees and consider restoring traditional management techniques, such as coppicing where this is appropriate, to encourage a diverse age structure and a rich ground flora.
- Encourage management and restoration of parkland and designed landscapes that are characteristic of the area.
- Resist urbanisation of the country lanes through addition of road markings and concrete kerbs or lamp posts or excessive signage that detracts from the rural character of the area. Consider the use of signage that fits with the rural character of the landscape.
- Conserve the character of the small scale stone built hamlets and villages and conserve the setting of historic houses and parklands such as Stourhead and Longleat.

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER CONTEXT

The character of the Wiltshire landscape has already been investigated in a number of studies as detailed above in Appendices 1 and 2. The *Wooded Greensand Hill* landscape type

is largely within the area covered by the Cranborne Chase AONB Landscape Character Assessment (2003) and includes most of Type 7: Greensands Hills from that study. The two character areas 7A: *Longleat-Stourhead Greensand Hills* and 7B: *Donhead-Fovant Greensand Hills* correspond to areas 7B Penselwood-Longlead Hills and 7A: Donhead-Fovant Hills in the AONB Assessment. However the boundaries for area 7A: *Longleat-Stourhead Greensand Hills* differ from the corresponding Cranborne Chase area due to the differences between the county and AONB boundaries to the north and west. Area 7C: *Bowood Greensand Hills* is partially covered in the Kennet District LCA and in the North Wiltshire District LCA under the respective Spye Parklands and Bowood and Bowden Parkland character areas.