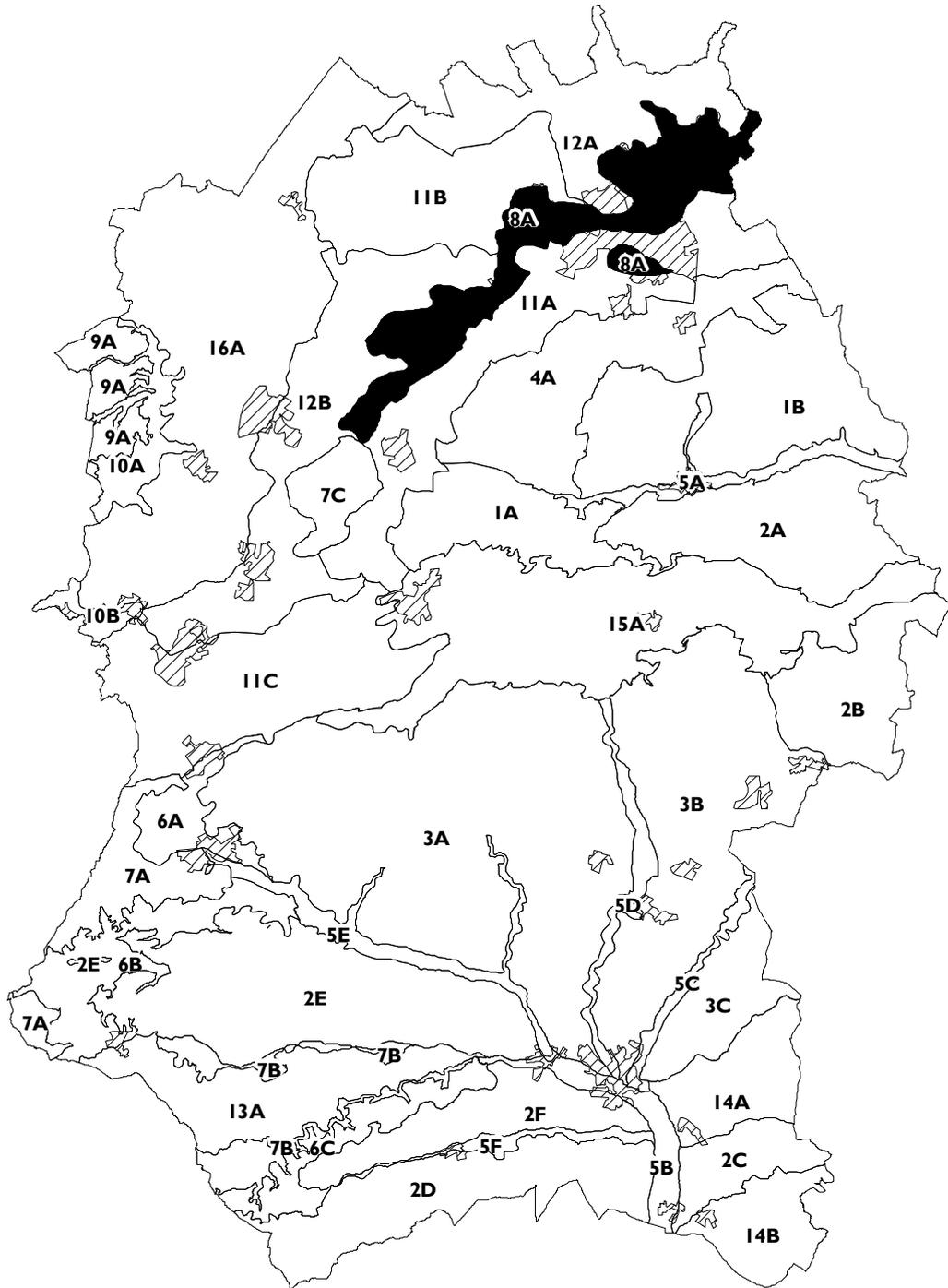


LANDSCAPE TYPE 8: LIMESTONE RIDGE



8: LIMESTONE RIDGE



LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREAS

8A Swindon - Lyneham Limestone Ridge

 Urban Area

TYPE 8: LIMESTONE RIDGE

DESCRIPTION

Location and Boundaries

The *Limestone Ridge* Landscape Type is a narrow band of limestone forming a series of hills running diagonally from the north east corner of Wiltshire at Highworth, through the northern part of the town of Swindon to Bremhill. The boundaries of the type generally follow the base of the slopes to the surrounding lower lying areas while to the northeast the county border forms the boundary. Only one character area occurs within the *Limestone Ridge* Landscape Type, 8A: *Swindon-Lyneham Limestone Ridge*.

Key Characteristics

- Rolling upland landscape formed by a linear outcrop of Stanford and Coral Rag Formation limestone.
- Level hill tops contrast with steep slopes down to the surrounding clay lowland.
- Predominantly a pastoral landscape with some arable fields.
- Large fields with a network of hedgerow with numerous hedgerow trees.
- Scattered tree clumps and woodland blocks, with some ancient woodland.
- A settled landscape with a number of large villages, several smaller settlements and scattered farmsteads.
- A variety of building styles from distinctive stone buildings in historic village centres to modern development using a mix of materials.
- Urban influences due to the proximity of Swindon and other settlements, military complexes and the busy A3102 road.
- An intricate network of rural roads connects the villages and farms.
- Panoramic views from higher ground, particularly from the western scarp slopes.

Physical Influences

The *Limestone Ridge* Landscape Type is characterised by a series of Stanford and Coral Rag Formation limestone outcrops forming hills emerging from the surrounding Ampthill Clay Formation mudstone. Sandstone also occurs around some of the limestone outcrops.

The *Limestone Ridge* forms a belt of rolling land rising from approximately 90m to 150m AOD. The western slopes can be steep, particularly to the south, with the eastern slopes more gentle, with a more gradual transition into the neighbouring clay vale.

Wootton Bassett Mud Spring SSSI, where vents emit liquid mud from a depth of 6m, has been recognised as a nationally important hydrological phenomenon, represented by very few examples in Britain.

Biodiversity

There are several habitats in the *Limestone Ridge* Landscape Type and a number of sites have been designated for their ecological value. There are two sites of national importance, designated as SSSIs. Restrop Farm and Brockhurst Wood SSSI exhibits a number of different habitats including unimproved hay meadows, permanent pasture, mature hedgerows, scrub and ancient woodland with a diverse range of species. Bencroft Hill Meadows SSSI is an area of unimproved pasture on the steep scarp slopes to the southeast of the type. This botanically important site is one of most species rich examples of this increasingly scarce habitat. There are also a large number of ancient woodlands identified as County Wildlife Sites including Great Wood at Stanton Fitzwarren, an ancient semi-natural woodland featuring a pond and consequent rich dragonfly assemblage, and Catcomb Wood, a large mainly ancient semi-natural woodland situated on the slope below Lyneham Airfield with a species-rich composition including wych elm and wood vetch.

Historic environment

The presence of round barrows around Lyneham indicates prehistoric activity. Later developments include an Iron Age Hill Fort dating from around 500BC. It is a well defended site with double banks constructed of limestone enclosing about eight acres. The Romans established a settlement on Swindon Hill and there is also a Roman villa near Tockenham.

The area became increasingly settled through the Saxon period, with the foundation of settlements such as Swindon and Wootton Bassett. The smaller villages in the area also have Saxon or often medieval cores. An important medieval site is Bradenstoke Abbey, an Augustinian priory on Clack Mount founded in 1142. Enclosure of the landscape occurred through the medieval period with small irregular field patterns still visible today in the more remote parts of the area. Most fields are however, indicative of more recent enclosure.

Settlement and built character

Settlement has a defining impact upon the *Limestone Ridge* Landscape Type. The influence of the urban centre of Swindon and other large settlements such as Wootton Bassett, Purton, Lyneham and Highworth is significant. The edge of Swindon is mixed in character with a number of different land uses including large industrial warehouses, residential estates, recreation areas and transport infrastructure creating a fragmented feel. Swindon is also prominent in views from higher ground, such as from Peat Moor and Moredon.

Perched on higher ground, the villages of Purton and Highworth are highly visible from the lower lying surrounding areas. Due to its plateau location, Lyneham is less visible from the lower ground, but has a profound impact upon its immediate surroundings. It is dominated by the airfield, related hangers and a large security fence, with the majority of 20th century residential development also linked to the military use of the area.

Elsewhere settlement consists of smaller villages, connected by a network of rural roads. Originally nucleated and centred at junctions, the villages have frequently expanded through ribbon development along the lanes. Building materials and styles are mixed. The central

cores frequently include fine medieval stone buildings, further out however more modern development uses a variety of materials including Coral Rag in rubble walls, Cotswold limestone, wood cladding and brick.

Several transport routes pass through the *Limestone Ridge* Landscape Type. The M4 passes east/west and is visually exposed creating a sense of movement and increased noise. The A3102 is also a very busy road, servicing most of the southern part of the area. Associated with these roads is a proliferation in signage and hard edging with a more urbanised character. Two railway lines also pass through the area.

The influence of the urban fringe, visible urban edges, the military complex at Lyneham, ribbon development, mix of building styles and the busy transport route all increase urban influences in this otherwise rural landscape.

CHARACTER AREAS

8A: Swindon-Lyneham Limestone Ridge

The *Swindon-Lyneham Limestone Ridge* Character Area is a belt of Coral Rag Formation limestone hills emerging from the lower clay vales. The land form of the area undulates, rising sharply along the western boundary to form a steep scarp slope in places. To the east the transition to the lower clay areas is more gradual. Land cover is predominantly pastoral farmland although there are pockets of arable and horse pasture. The fields are fairly large and divided by a network of hedgerows with numerous hedgerow trees and intermittent woodland clumps, although the hedgerows have become flailed and more open in places. Smaller, more sinuous fields indicative of medieval enclosure are also present in more isolated areas. Settlement has a considerable influence over the area: the Swindon-Lyneham Limestone Ridge is divided into two sections by the large urban mass of Swindon and other large settlements also have a visual influence such as Highworth and Purton, which are highly visible from surrounding lower areas. The RAF airfield at Lyneham, dominates the southern central part of the area. Smaller settlements have also been affected by urban influences with ribbon development expansion and a proliferation of signage along the more popular transport routes, such as the A3102. Building materials and styles vary throughout, with local stone buildings and more modern estates on the periphery. Within the area views are intermittent, but from the peripheral slopes there are panoramic views. Around Swindon the town dominates but further south and in the very north of the area the views out across the rural clay vales create a more remote feel.

EVALUATION

Positive landscape features of significance

- Some areas of peaceful rural landscape.
- Wide views over surrounding vales and lowland areas.
- Predominantly pastoral with some areas of permanent pasture of high ecological value.
- Strong hedgerow network with frequent hedgerow trees.
- Scattered woodlands, some of it ancient.

- Village centres with vernacular buildings of local stone.

Forces for change

- Loss of hedgerows and hedgerow trees in some areas plus poor management.
- Potential changes in farming leading to less livestock grazing and consequent scrub encroachment or management as horse paddocks.
- Need for sustainable woodland management to maintain ancient and other woodlands.
- Pressure for expansion of villages particularly those close to large settlements and transport links.
- Pressure for linear development on main road corridors.
- Increasing traffic on narrow rural lane network leading to urbanisation through kerbing, additional lighting and signage.
- Urbanising influence of large settlements.

Condition

Away from the main transport routes and larger settlements the landscape is generally in good condition as well cared for pastoral farmland. However, closer to settlement the landscape becomes more degraded with areas of failed hedgerows and urban fringe land uses, such as horse pasture. The overall condition of the *Limestone Ridge Landscape Type* is therefore considered to be **moderate**.

Strength of character

The *Limestone Ridge Landscape Type* is a landscape of **moderate** character. The mix of land uses around large settlements and the ribbon development expansion of smaller settlements creates a fragmented feeling. The area is also disturbed by the visual and acoustic intrusion of the M4 and A3102 roads, the inconsistent building materials and styles and a sense of urbanisation intruding on the otherwise rural landscape of pastoral fields with an intact pattern of hedgerows, hedgerow trees and small woodlands.

Inherent landscape sensitivities

- Views to and from the lower surrounding clay vales.
- The areas of peaceful pastoral landscape.
- The hedgerow network and hedgerow trees.
- Scattered woodland blocks particularly the ancient woodlands of high ecological value.
- Isolated areas of hay meadow and permanent pasture.
- The traditional structure of villages.

- The rural lanes.

Strategy

The overall management strategy for the *Limestone Ridge* Landscape type is one that **conserve** the elements that contribute to its character or are important in their own right, such as the network of hedgerows and the village centres while **enhancing** those areas, such as the urban fringes, that are becoming degraded.

Broad Management Objectives

- Encourage repair, replanting and extension of the hedgerow network, improved maintenance of the existing hedgerows and nurture new hedgerow trees.
- Conserve existing trees and encourage the planting of new hedgerow trees and woodland belts, especially around larger settlements where they are being lost or could break up harsh urban edges.
- Limit further uncontrolled spreading of settlement and ribbon development concentrating new development within existing settlements.
- Discourage intrusive development along the visually sensitive ridgeline.
- Reduce the impact of urban influences on roads such as the proliferation of signage and hard edging to encourage a more rural atmosphere.
- Seek to limit the visual and acoustic intrusion of the main roads through measures such as tree planting.

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 *Limestone Ridge* Landscape Types has, in part, also been covered by the North Wiltshire Landscape Character Assessment, 'Character Area 3 – Swindon Fringe' and 'Character Area 13 - Lyneham Hills.

The Swindon Borough Landscape Character Assessment also covers part of the Type under the character area Mid-Vale Ridge.

