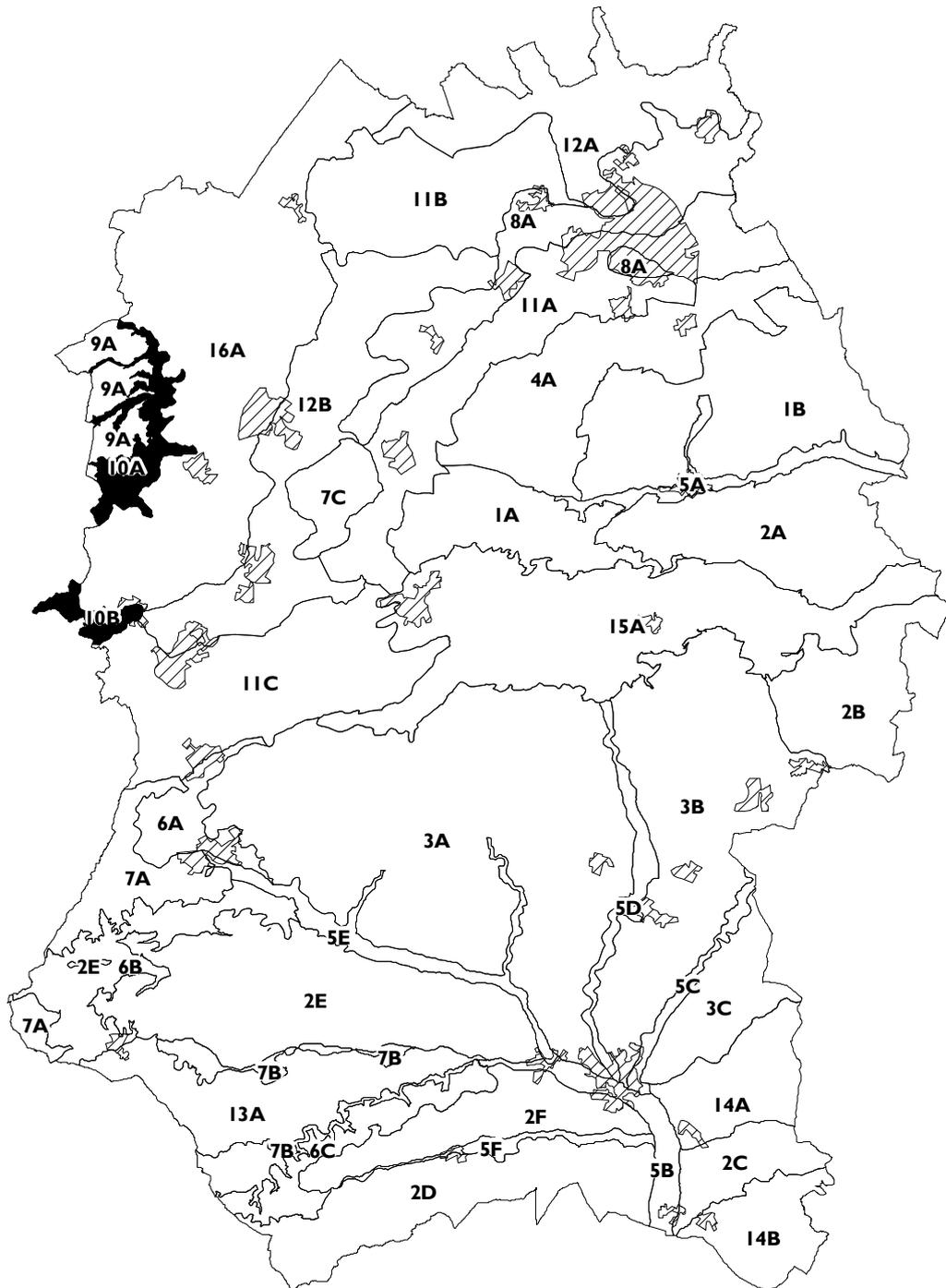


# LANDSCAPE TYPE 10: LIMESTONE VALLEYS

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# I0: LIMESTONE VALLEYS



## LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREAS

**I0A** By Brook Limestone Valley

**I0B** Avon Limestone Valley

 Urban Area

# TYPE 10: LIMESTONE VALLEYS

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## DESCRIPTION

### Location and boundaries

The *Limestone Valleys* Landscape Type is a series of valleys created by two rivers and their tributaries on the north west edge of the county. Each river is described as a separate character area: To the north is *10A: By Brook Limestone Valley* and to the south *10B: Avon Limestone Valley*. The boundaries are defined along the crest of the valley slopes, where they meet the surrounding clay vales and limestone wolds. Both character areas extend beyond the county boundary. The upper valley sides are included in this type but not in the *Chalk River Valley* Landscape Type because in the latter they are more similar in character to the surrounding downs while in the *Limestone Valleys* they are very different to the adjacent *Limestone Wold*.

The *Limestone Valleys* form part of the eastern edge of the Cotswold AONB.

### Key characteristics

- Moderately broad river valleys with gently undulating valley floors and steep limestone sides.
- Intimate, small scale landscape with landform and woodlands restricting long views out of the valley.
- Strong sense of enclosure created by landform contributing to a remote, rural character, despite numerous settlements.
- Some significant areas of woodland, a number of which are ancient semi-natural woodlands, particularly on steeper slopes of the valleys cut by tributaries.
- Predominance of open pastoral farmland divided by hedgerows into a variety of field sizes.
- Sequence of stone built villages occupying secluded locations in valley bottoms, often in association with a bridging point or along transport routes defined by the valley.
- Small scale quarries and mines.
- Associations with the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century weaving industry with weavers cottages, mills and other industrial relics.

### Physical influences

The middle Jurassic Oolitic Limestone and Lias Group sandstone underlie the steeper upper slopes of the valleys with the older Lias Group Clay forming the more gentle slopes. More recent deposits of alluvium occur in the valley bottoms alongside the watercourses. The main valleys, which form part of a wider radial system of water courses feeding the Avon,

are relatively broad with flat to gently undulating bottoms at approximately 40m AOD with the valley sides rising up to over 120m AOD creating a distinct enclosed character.

The distribution of soil types reflects the underlying geology with shallow clay over limestone dominating the higher slopes, deep clay towards the lower slopes and silt over sandstone along the valley floor.

Gripwood Quarry (Located in Area 10B: Avon Limestone Valley) is designated as a SSSI, for its geological interest, as it is the only place where the junction between the Bradford Clay and the underlying Great Oolite limestone can be seen.

## **Biodiversity**

The *Limestone Valleys* have a rich biodiversity interest with numerous tracts of semi-natural ancient woodland and species rich limestone grassland. The landscape is a valuable habitat for bats. Several sites within the areas are of national importance, designated as SSSIs and SACs.

Colerne Park and Monk's Wood SSSI and Midford Valley Woods SSSI, are good examples of southern calcareous ash-wych elm wood with a mix of high forest and coppice-with-standards, and several wide rides and clearings. Midford Valley is also contains a floristically rich damp grassland supporting a range of ferns and a diverse herb layer.

Adjacent to Colerne Park and Monk's Wood is Honeybrook Farm SSSI, one of the few remaining non-intensively managed lowland farms in Britain on which agricultural chemicals have never been used. It comprises of a series of unimproved neutral to calcareous hay meadows, unimproved limestone grassland, ancient semi-natural woodland, a small lake and an undisturbed meandering stretch of river.

Other areas designated as SSSIs include; West Yatton Down SSSI, an area of ancient meadow pasture systems and ash-wych elm wood; Out Wood SSSI with ancient ash-maple woodland and Dank's Down and Truckle Hill SSSI and Rack Hill SSSI, both ecologically rich limestone grassland.

Box Mine and Winsley Mines are both designated a SSSIs and SACs. They consist of networks of man-made tunnels which is used by bats for hibernation, mating and as a staging post prior to dispersal. Box mine seasonally supports up to 10% of the total British population of greater horseshoe bats.

County Wildlife Sites in the *Limestone Valleys* include By Brook, a riverine system of high biodiversity value with populations of native crayfish, brook lamprey, otter and water vole and Conkwell Wood, an ancient semi-natural woodland site with mixed replanting retaining some wych elm, a rich fungal diversity and ground flora indicative of ancient woodland.

## **Historic environment**

The lower valley sides, a sheltered location with a plentiful supply of water would have been an attractive place to settle for early man. The close proximity of fortified sites, most notably on the edge of Castle Combe also demonstrates that the area has been settled for a significant amount of time dating from at least the Iron Age, through the Roman and Medieval periods.

During the 15<sup>th</sup> century the close proximity of flowing water and sheep grazing on the valley sides was a catalyst for the development of the weaving industry, and with it came the construction of weaving cottages, many of which can still be found throughout the valley. Similarly, mills and other 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century industrial relics are also apparent.

### **Settlement and built character**

The frequency of settlement within the *Limestone Valleys* varies from the relatively dense to sparsely scattered farmsteads. Urban influences are apparent in some areas, due to the close proximity of Bath and Chippenham and views to the sometimes prominent urban edge of Bradford-on-Avon in the Avon Valley. However, due to the enclosed landform with mainly short or channelled views, this landscape type retains an intimate enclosed character and is perceived as rural. Villages are clustered along the lower slopes of the valleys, often at traditional crossing points and where rural lanes meet, in some instances however, ribbon development has occurred. Buildings are generally vernacular in style, constructed from stone with clay tile or slate roofs.

The transport routes are generally minor with some inaccessible areas. Rural roads and sunken lanes criss-cross the valleys with more major routes following the valley sides.

## **CHARACTER AREAS**

### **I0A: By Brook**

The By Brook character area can be sub-divided into two distinct areas. The section to the north is a narrow, wooded, steep sided valley with several tributaries winding from the west also forming deeply incised valleys. This enclosed intimate landscape contrasts strongly with the level open character of the adjacent *Limestone Wold*. The valleys are dominated by broadleaved woodland, some ancient plus intermittent conifer plantations. This forms a patchwork with small areas of calcareous species rich grassland on the upper slopes. The valley floor and lower slopes are pastoral with the meandering River By Brook a strong presence fringed by willows crossed by modest bridges. The villages of Castle Combe, Ford and Slaughterford nestle on the lower slopes of the valley.

The lower section of the By Brook is broader with a wide, flat to gently undulating valley floor. The high and sometimes steep valley sides retain the sense of being in a valley by restricting and channelling views. Here pastoral fields dominate, with medium sized irregular fields bounded by healthy hedgerows. This is a more open landscape with broadleaved woodland and coniferous plantations restricted to the upper slopes and valley rim. The large village of Box and smaller settlements of Box Hill and Rudloe range over the south eastern slopes of the valley. The villages throughout the area are largely built of the distinctive local stone, however dwellings of different materials plus kerbed roads and lighting give some of the edges of the villages a more urbanised character.

### **I0B: Avon**

The *Avon Limestone Valley* is a broad yet steep sided valley following the course of the River Avon and the Kennet and Avon Canal. Woodland within the valley is a significant presence, cloaking the upper slopes and valley tops and limiting views to urban edges such as Bradford-on-Avon to the east. This is a well settled area with villages following the transport routes along the valley sides. Buildings are predominantly stone and vernacular in style with some

large mansions. Despite the fairly high density of settlement, busier and more frequent transport routes and close proximity large urban areas the landform and woodland help to retain a rural feeling, directing views to the pastoral lower slopes. In common with the *By Brook Limestone Valley* this highly settled area has some more recent development at the edges of its traditional stone villages.

## EVALUATION

### Positive landscape features of significance

- Strong sense of enclosure created by the valley landform.
- The network of natural water courses.
- The extensive areas of woodland on steep valley sides including semi-natural ancient woodland.
- Surviving areas of species rich calcareous grassland.
- Intact network of hedgerows.
- Consistent use of stone and clay roof tiles or slates as building materials giving a strong sense of unity to settlement within the area.
- Vernacular built form including terraces of weavers' cottages, mills and impressive larger mansions.
- Intimate network of rural roads and sunken lanes

### Forces for change

- Decline in species rich grasslands and hay meadow with intensification of agricultural practices.
- Reversion of previous industrial landscapes to unmanaged sites.
- Suburbanisation of existing rural valley settlements.
- Isolated development such as new single dwellings on the valley slopes that might compromise the rural character.
- Loss of vernacular architectural features such as old barns and industrial heritage features such as mills.

### Condition

The *Limestone Valley* landscape has a high degree of intactness and has a number of high quality landscape features such as the ancient woodland. The pastoral farmland appears to be well managed and the character of the stone villages intact. In some areas however, particularly around the larger urban area of Bradford-on-Avon its strong character has been diluted with more ubiquitous suburban elements. The overall condition of the landscape is perceived to be **good**.

## **Strength of character**

The enclosed valley landform retains a distinct pattern of landscape features, including steep valley sides with tracts of ancient woodland on the upper slopes and a predominance of pastoral farmland of the lower and gentler slopes. Small stone built villages and interesting architectural elements such as the weavers' terraces and industrial mills define the settlement. This is therefore a landscape of **strong** character.

## **Inherent landscape sensitivities**

- The rural character of the valleys.
- The intact pattern of medium and irregular pastoral fields bounded by a network of hedges.
- Tracts of biologically important species rich calcareous grassland and hay meadow.
- Extensive areas of ancient woodland
- The valley sides and skyline which are largely free from development
- Nucleated villages of vernacular buildings constructed from local stone

## **STRATEGY**

The overall strategy of the *Limestone Valleys* Landscape Type is to **conserve** the rural character of the valleys and retain the important landscape elements and patterns. This includes the tracts of ancient woodland, the surviving calcareous grassland, vernacular and industrial features (mills, weavers terraces etc) the character and setting of the stone villages and the network of winding rural roads and sunken lanes.

## **Broad management objectives**

- Conserve and manage important areas of ancient woodland and species rich grassland and take opportunities to extend these habitats.
- Counteract the impact of degraded urban edges with new woodland planting that links to existing woodland of the valley slopes.
- Retain the distinctive character of the villages by restricting development that encroaches the valley sides. Ensure any change respects the traditional stone built character and vernacular form.
- Conserve and restore traditional hedgerow boundaries.
- Conserve the distinctive rural and dispersed settlement pattern and the network of rural roads and sunken lanes that connect them.

## **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 Valleys* Landscape Type is covered

by Landscape Character Assessment and Guidelines for the Cotswolds AONB 2004 (currently in draft form) types '4: Enclosed Limestone Valley', '12: Dip-Slope Lowland Valley' and '13: Low Limestone Plateau'.

Character Area *10A: By Brook Limestone Valley* is covered by a combination of area '4D: Lower By Brook Valley' and area '12A: Upper By Brook Valley' in the Cotswolds assessment, with the boundaries defined along the crest of the valley slopes and by geological changes to the west and the country border to the south.

Character Area *10B: Avon Limestone Valley* is primarily covered by area '4B: Bathampton and Limpley Stoke' and to a lesser extent area '13B: Hinton Charterhouse Plateau' and '11A: South and Mid Cotswolds Lowlands' in the Cotswolds assessment.