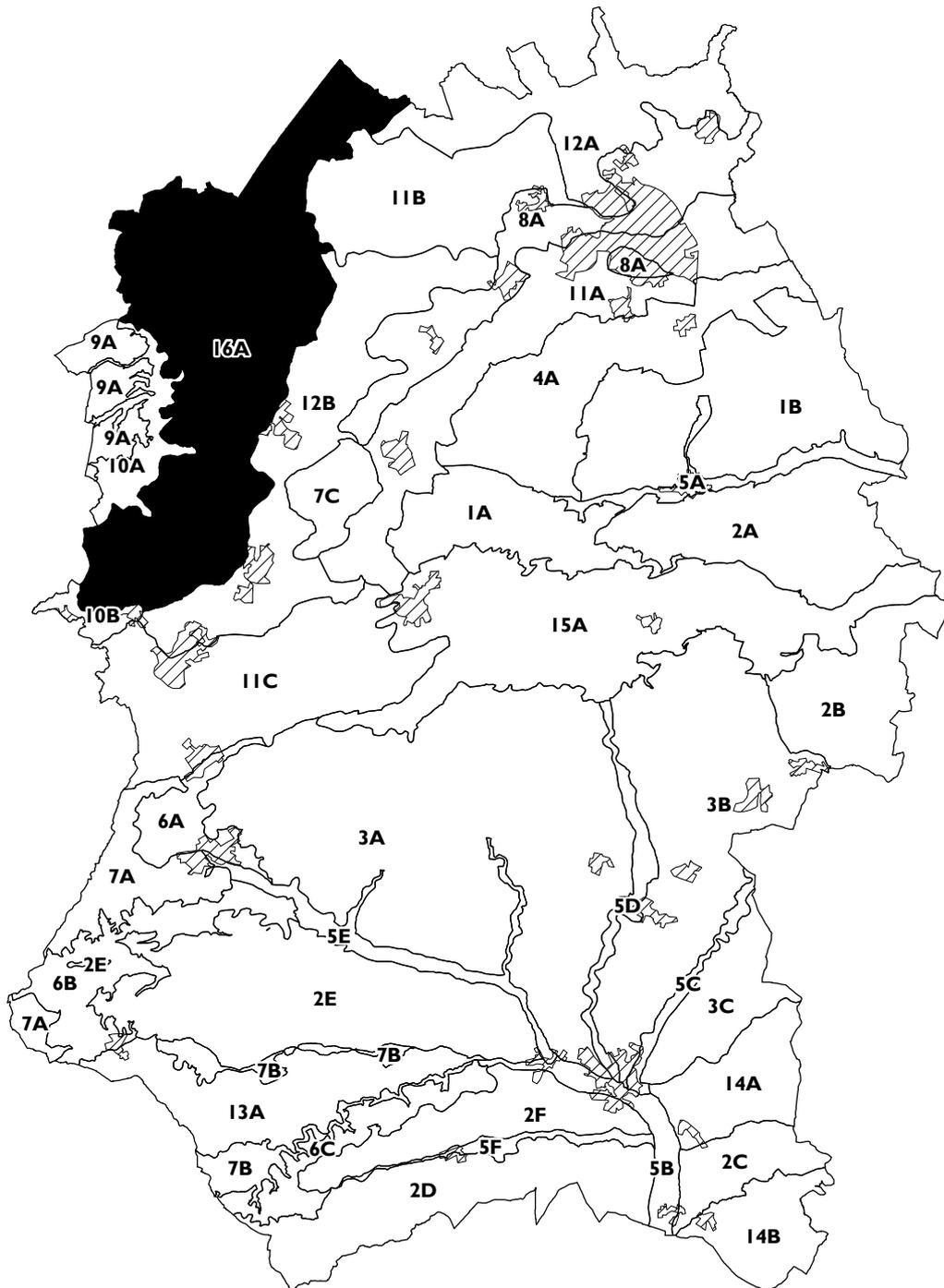


LANDSCAPE TYPE 16: LIMESTONE LOWLAND



16: LIMESTONE LOWLAND



LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREAS

16A Malmesbury-Corsham Limestone Lowland

 **Urban Area**

TYPE 16: LIMESTONE LOWLAND

DESCRIPTION

Location and Boundaries

The *Limestone Lowland* Landscape Type covers a large swathe of northwest Wiltshire. The area extends from Bradford-on-Avon in the south to the Kemble Airfield in the far north. The county border constrains the area to the north and west. The boundary to the east is a less distinct transition, occurring with the change in underlying geology from limestone to clay. There is only one character area within the *Limestone Lowland* Landscape Type, 16A: *Malmesbury-Corsham Limestone Lowlands*.

The western edge of the *Limestone Lowlands* Landscape Type forms part of the Cotswolds AONB.

Key Characteristics

- Gently undulating lowland farmland over underlying geology of predominantly mudstone and limestone with some pockets of clay.
- A peaceful and rural landscape with subtle variations in character relating to the varied geology, topography and water courses.
- Mix of permanent pasture and arable farmland.
- Strong network of hedgerows with hedgerow trees.
- Dry stone walls field boundaries in some areas and around settlements.
- Field pattern predominantly large geometric field typical of eighteenth and nineteenth century enclosure with small scale irregular fields of medieval pattern close to close to settlement.
- More open areas of higher ground to the west offer panoramic views over the type, elsewhere occasional woodland blocks, copses and frequent hedgerow trees give a greater sense of enclosure, with intermittent views.
- Numerous rivers forming shallow valleys, with the watercourses sometimes lined with willows.
- Settlements in the form of historic market towns, villages and scattered farmsteads distributed throughout the type linked by network of rural roads.
- Traditional buildings of local limestone buildings an outstanding feature.
- Presence of historic parkland and estates marked by stone estate walls, grand entrances and parkland trees and avenues.

Physical Influences

The underlying geology of the *Limestone Lowland* Landscape Type is from the Great Oolite Groups, formed in the Mid Jurassic Period. A parallel band of Forest Marble mudstone and Cornbrash limestone underlie most of the area. The boundary between these formations is irregular and intermittent occurrences of Forest Marble limestone and Kellaways clay are also apparent, to the west and east respectively. This fragmentation in underlying geology gives rise to the subtle variations in land cover and character over the type in a gradual transition from the west which is dominated by limestone to the eastern borders of Kellaways clay.

There are two SSSIs designated for their geological interest. Corsham Railway Cutting exposes an area of Forest Marble Mudstone revealing important coral 'reef knolls' of palaeontological interest and inter-reef oolitic sediment. Stanton St Quintin Quarry SSSI provides one of the country's few complete exposures of cornbrash, yielded ammonites of biostratigraphic importance.

The landform undulates, rising from around 60m to 130m AOD with an overall slope from higher ground in the west to the lower clay land to the east. Some flatter areas occur on higher ground and localised valleys associated with the numerous rivers are also evident throughout.

Biodiversity

The landscape as a whole is a valuable habitat for bats, in particular Box Hill Mine (SSSI and part of the Bradford on Avon SAC). There are several areas of ecological interest in the *Limestone Lowland* Landscape Type including three nationally important SSSIs (one of which is also a SAC) and numerous Country Wildlife Sites, often where ancient woodland or pockets of chalk grassland are present. There is also a strong network of hedgerows and frequent hedgerow and standard trees including veteran oaks, ash and willow along water courses.

Inwood SSSI is an area calcareous ash-wych elm and dry maple woodland with an extremely rich ground flora including species of plant that are nationally rare. The area also includes an area of unimproved neutral hay meadow. Harries Ground SSSI at Rodbourne is also an area of species rich neutral lowland hay meadow on an area of clay in the Avon vale.

Box Hill Mine is designated as a SSSI and as a SAC. It comprises a network 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 include: Stanton Park, an ancient woodland on the site of a Roman villa with a very rich ground flora including wood millet, wood spurge and woodruff in the semi-natural areas; Hazelton Wood, a small ancient semi-natural woodland site which, although is now mixed plantation, retains much of the understorey and ground flora of interest including bath asparagus; and Hebden Leaze House Meadows, species-rich meadows of limestone grassland adjacent to Luckington Brook - upright brome is abundant and also present are burnet saxifrage, cowslip and dwarf thistle.

Historic environment

Prehistoric sites include two chambered long mounds near Luckington plus a Neolithic chambered long barrow at Lanhill and a Bronze Age bowl barrow at Barrow Farm. The area became more heavily settled in the Roman period with Easton Grey, to the north of the area, dating from the first century A.D. There are also a number of Roman roads in the area.

The Domesday Book shows that a large part of the *Limestone Lowlands* Landscape Type was at one time owned by the Bishop of Glastonbury. The boundaries of royal forests lying to the west of Chippenham were declared in 1228, although these were largely felled and enclosed in the 17th century. Evidence of small and irregular medieval field patterns are still apparent, particularly close to settlement, although most of the fields are larger and more regular indicating more recent enclosure.

There are a number of imposing houses set in historic parkland, such as Luckington Court, notable for its tree collection, and Corsham Court where Lancelot 'Capability' Brown and Humphrey Repton worked on the grounds.

Settlement and built character

Settlement in the *Limestone Lowland* Landscape Type is in the form of scattered villages and farmsteads, connected by a network of rural roads, and constructed almost universally of limestone to the west of the area with occasional use of brick on the eastern edges of the type. Villages are peaceful and rural, often centred around a village green, pond or area of common land. Buildings are traditional in style, with many dating from the 17th and 18th centuries. Large stately homes and manor houses also occur throughout the landscape, often with large parkland estates. Dry stone walls occur more frequently around and close to villages in western areas but are less common as field boundaries elsewhere. This distinctive pattern and style of settlement within the *Limestone Lowland* Landscape Type is a key element of its character.

Larger stone settlements are Corsham and the ancient market town of Malmesbury. Chippenham however, is the largest settlement in the area, expanding considerably since the 1950s. More recent housing development is visible from the A350, which defines the western edge of the town and acts as a main north/south route through the area.

Other developments that have an impact on the landscape include two air fields, on areas of higher and flatter ground Kemble and Hullavington. Most of the roads in the type are modest rural roads however the M4 motorway passes through from east to west with an increased sense of movement and localised noise.

CHARACTER AREAS

16A: Malmesbury-Corsham Limestone Lowlands

Malmesbury-Corsham Limestone Lowlands is the only area within of the *Limestone Lowlands* Landscape Type. It covers a large area of northwest Wiltshire occurring between areas of limestone valleys and higher limestone wold to the west (outside the county) and clay to the east.

The area is predominantly rolling mixed pastoral and arable farmland, in a pattern of large fields bounded by hedgerows with hedgerow trees. The hedgerows vary in condition with some gappy and low flailed hedges in evidence for example around Grittleton.

Changes in the underlying geology and land use cause subtle localised variations throughout the area within an overall graduation from higher ground founded on limestone to the west to lower ground on clay to the east. On the higher and steeper ground of the Forest Marble Limestone to the west, and particularly to the south of Corsham, hedgerows are less prominent with dry stone walls dividing the fields. With less visual obstruction, there are panoramic and distant views the farmland as it falls away gently to the east. There are also some more open areas around Biddestone and to the north of the area. Here a comparative scarcity of tree cover creates a greater sense of exposure. Shallow valleys along the numerous springs and brooks in the area have a more intimate and enclosed feeling. The most prominent of these is along the River Avon where the locally steep valley sides give a sense of containment, and the rich vegetation including willows line the river bank. There are also areas of estate and historic parkland, often associated with large houses. Areas of open pastoral land with numerous standard trees can be found throughout the area, some contain more designed element such as the large avenue near Monkton Farleigh.

A key element in the area is the distinctive limestone villages and towns, connected by a network of winding rural lanes and straight Roman roads. Some brick built dwellings and farmhouses appear to the east of the area reflecting the changing geology. Traditional buildings are frequently centred around village greens and ponds or form a more linear settlement forming a main street along one of the rural roads.

EVALUATION

Positive landscape features of significance

- Peaceful rural landscape.
- Panoramic views from higher ground.
- Strong network of hedgerows, hedgerow trees and occasional woodland copses.
- Dry stone walls.
- Remaining areas with medieval field pattern.
- Historic parklands.
- Remaining areas of ancient woodland, chalk grassland and other areas of ecological diversity.
- Distinctive traditional limestone villages.
- Network of rural road.

Forces for change

- Continued amalgamation and enlargement of fields.
- Some hedgerow field boundaries have been intensively flailed.
- Some dry stone wall field boundaries are becoming overgrown.
- Increasing traffic on narrow rural lane network leading to urbanisation through kerbing, additional lighting and signage.
- Pressure for new development along rural lanes and around existing settlements.

Condition

The condition of the *Limestone Lowland* Landscape type is generally **good** with intact hedgerows, traditional villages of vernacular stone dwellings, village greens and stone walls. In some sections of the areas there are elements in poorer condition such as gappy and flailed hedgerows, overgrown stone walls and encroaching horse pasture close to some of the larger settlement.

Strength of character

The *Limestone Lowland* Landscape Type is united by the strong character of its traditional stone built settlements however, other elements such as land use, topography and field boundaries vary subtly across the type making it less distinctive and cohesive and therefore the strength of character overall is judged as **moderate**.

Inherent landscape sensitivities

- The peaceful rural nature of the area.
- Areas of ecological importance including ancient woodland and chalk grassland.
- The setting, containment and scale of the limestone villages.
- The remaining medieval field patterns and dry stone walls around and close to settlement.
- Historic parkland.

Strategy

The strategy for the *Limestone Lowland* Landscape Type is to **conserve** those elements intrinsic to the type's character or important in their own right, such as the distinctive stone villages, the areas of ecological importance and the historic parkland and to **strengthen** locally degraded elements such as the flailed hedgerows and overgrown stone walls.

Broad Management Objectives

- Conserve the network of hedgerows, hedgerow trees and woodland copses and take opportunities for new planting where this will strengthen local character (for instance

avoiding planting that will affect the open views in the high ground at the west of the area).

- Encourage conservation and rebuilding of dry stone wall field boundaries, particularly close to settlement.
- Conserve the remaining areas of ecological interest such as those with statutory designations, areas of ancient woodland, veteran hedgerow trees and chalk grassland.
- Maintain the subtle variations that occur throughout the landscape, encouraging local distinctiveness for instance in the variation in field boundaries from hedgerows to stone walls.
- Encourage management and restoration of the historic parkland landscapes that are characteristic of the area.
- Retain the distinctive character of the villages; ensuring any change respects the traditional stone built character and vernacular form.
- 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.

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 *Limestone Lowland* landscape type is largely within the area covered by the North Wiltshire Landscape Character Assessment (2004). The type broadly covers the same area as the Limestone Lowland Farmland Landscape Type from the North Wiltshire study, and includes areas of the following North Wiltshire character areas: Sherston Dipslope Lowland, Minety and Malmesbury Rolling Lowland, Hullavington Rolling Lowland, Corsham Rolling Lowland and Upper Avon Valley.

The western part of the type is also covered in the Landscape Character Assessment and Guidelines for Cotswolds AONB (2004). Areas of the Dip Slope Lowland and Cornbrash Lowlands Landscape Types are encompassed in the *Limestone Lowland*.