

3.1 Establishment of the Cotswold Water Park

The Cotswold Water Park was established in 1967, with a joint resolution by the Cotswold Water Park Joint Committee that confirmed:

'the area should become a water park serving the interests of aquatic sportsmen, naturalists and others who wish to enjoy in a general way a stretch of inland water'.

This resolution by the Local Authorities with administrative responsibility for the Water Park affirmed their commitment to the management of a process of landscape change that had been evolving for some years as a consequence of the extensive mineral extraction that had taken place within the area, and the widespread restoration to inland lakes. These changes, however, have developed within a pattern of rural settlements and farmholdings supporting an agricultural regime that has existed across the area for many centuries, long before the Water Park was established, and provide a reference of the previous character of the landscape.

Since 1967, the development of a wetland landscape and associated uses has continued to the present time. With mineral reserves still available across the area, particularly in the central part of the Cotswold Water Park, the process of change is set to continue for some decades. However, the potential location, extent and form of future extraction has to be balanced against other requirements. These include environmental issues, notably the need to protect and enrich the area's landscape, biodiversity and heritage resource; the conservation of water quality; meeting the continuing and potentially increasing demand for recreation, sport and leisure facilities and pursuits across the Park; and also taking careful account of the quality of life and economic opportunities for local inhabitants and creation of sustainable communities.

3.2 The Cotswold Water Park Strategy

In 2000 the Cotswold Water Park Joint Committee published a 'Cotswold Water Park Strategy 2000-2006' which identified the principal strategic issues, and an overarching statement that set out the following Vision for the Water Park:

'The Cotswold Water Park is and will continue to be a premier site for nature conservation, leisure and tourism. The Park should seek to become an exemplar in the field of landscape restoration. The guiding principle is that of sustainable development, where the needs of business, people (including existing residents) and wildlife are successfully met without prejudicing the quality of life for future generations.'

Delivering this Vision is a challenging process. Consistent with the principles of sustainable development that underpins the Vision, there is a clear need to carefully balance the interrelated and often conflicting issues and opportunities that stem from the wide range of functions and requirements presented by the Water Park. These include:

- Management and appropriate control of the ongoing mineral extraction activities;
- Protection and enhancement of the biodiversity resource;
- Conservation of the water resource;
- Protection of the cultural heritage resource;
- Restoration, enhancement and enrichment of the landscape character;
- Promotion and further development of sustainable tourism, leisure and sport activities;
- Maintenance of and improvements to the road infrastructure;
- Accommodation of the military activities at RAF Fairford;
- Conservation and enhancement of the character and quality of the settlements;
- Support for agricultural activities and their viability; and
- Promotion of the economic viability of the area;

3.3 A New Masterplan for the Cotswold Water Park

In recognition of the continued need to promote and deliver a coherent and holistically planned future for the Cotswold Water Park, in 2006 the Joint Committee commissioned a Strategic Review of the area encompassing an additional area of land extending beyond the current designated area in order to address the wider context. This extended area is contained within a functional boundary that defines 'the study area' and provides a framework within which to develop a new Masterplan and Strategy for the Cotswold Water Park.

3.4 Physical Context

Within the Cotswold Water Park study area the geological range is composed entirely of sedimentary rocks of the Middle and Upper Jurassic period. The geological strata have a south-easterly incline with progressively younger rock formations outcropping towards the south.

The northern and extreme western perimeters of the study area are underlain by the Forest Marble and Cornbrash Formations. These rocks consist of bands of clay and coarse crumbly limestone and are softer and more easily weathered than the harder Oolitic Limestones to the north that form the Cotswolds massif. They are represented by a gently undulating lowland landform. Nevertheless, they are more resistant than the even softer and broad outcrop of Kellaways Clay and Oxford Clay to the south which underlay the greater part of the Thames River Basin, and indeed the study area. These softer Silty Clay and Mudstone formations have been progressively eroded by the Thames and its tributaries to form a broad, low lying and very shallow sloping river basin. Beyond the Oxford Clay Vale and to the south-east, a limited outcrop of the Corallian Limestone ridge extends

into the study area in the form of a small outlier of the Stanford and Coral Rag Formations. This outlier is part of a more extensive linear outcrop that extends north-east – south-west through Oxfordshire and Wiltshire. Its superior resistance to erosion has resulted in a prominent ridge and steep, mainly north-west facing scarp slopes that define the south-eastern edge to the study area.

The Cotswold Water Park and wider study area is located within the Upper Thames Catchment Area and extends across the broad river basin through which the upper reaches of this nationally important river flows. Many of the Upper Thames tributaries join the main river within the Water Park study area. Flowing into the Thames from the north, these comprise the River Churn, Ampney Brook, Marston Meysey Brook, River Coln and River Leach. These are all limestone fed rivers as they rise in the Oolitic Limestones or Cornbrash Formation within the Cotswolds. To the south, a further series of watercourses flow into the Thames comprising the Swill Brook, Derry Brook, River Key, River Ray, Share Ditch, Byedemill Brook and finally the River Cole. While most of these southern rivers rise on clays, the Swill Brook is also a limestone fed river, rising from springs on the Forest Marble and Cornbrash Formation.

Overlaying the solid geology, extensive drift deposits have been deposited across the Thames River Basin through the erosion and fluvial action of the rivers flowing across the Cotswolds, and by melt water in the post glacial period from retreating glaciers. Sand and gravel, derived from the Jurassic Limestone, has been deposited in four separate river terrace deposits, varying in depth from a few centimetres to 6 metres, and begin about 1 metre below the surface. In addition, alluvial deposits are present along most of the river valleys.

3.5 Historic Development

The presence of the sand and gravel deposits in the Upper Thames River Basin has given rise to a nationally important gravel extraction industry, with the reserves representing the most important source of these minerals in the South-West of England. The extraction of sand and gravel in the Upper Thames area began in the 1920s signalling the creation of the first lakes. Since then, the extraction industry has progressively developed, and through the incremental creation of many lakes following the restoration of the worked areas, this has been the stimulus for formally establishing the Cotswold Water Park.

As a result of the impermeable nature of the Oxford Clay, the water table is located within the gravels or the soils above. The first quarries were dug 'wet'. Today, however, quarries are 'de-watered', and when extraction is complete, the pumps are switched off and the holes fill naturally with water. Since the early beginnings 137 lakes have been created covering almost 1,000 hectares of open water, and providing an extensive area of inland water that is larger than The Broads. Because of the lime rich water, the Water Park is also the most extensive marl lake system in Britain.

At present, 7 mineral companies are extracting 2 million tonnes per year from 360 hectares, with permission for extraction for some further 370 hectares. The emerging mineral plans propose the allocation of another 550 hectares for extraction. Beyond this, there is approximately another 50 years supply of sand & gravel.

Today, some 20,000 people live in the Cotswold Water Park's settlements and farmholdings with many more residing just outside the boundary and therefore also affected by its operations. The Park is also a source of employment for many people with about 850 businesses operating in the area. The Water Park also attracts more than 500,000 visitors every year, drawn by the attractive qualities of the lakes and their wildlife interests, and sports and leisure facilities.

Several rural settlements, commercial developments and a wide range of leisure facilities and farmsteads are dispersed across the Water Park and the wider study area, linked by a network of minor local roads. A number of major routes also serve the area, both along its periphery, notably the A417, and also crossing the Park area, in particular the east west aligned B4696 Spine Road that transects the core of the western part of the Cotswold Water Park and also the A419 that dissects the Park. Although smaller in scale, the Eastern Spine road links Cricklade to Fairford.

The designated area of the Cotswold Water Park is divided into three main parts. The Western section stretches from Poole Keynes, through Somerford Keynes, Shorcote & Ashton Keynes, to South Cerney. The Central section runs from Cerney Wick & Cricklade, across the A419, to beyond Latton & Down Ampney, while the Eastern section includes the villages of Kempford, Fairford, Whelford & Lechlade. In the past, most excavation occurred in the Western & Eastern sections, but quarrying has recently begun in the Central section in the vicinity of Eysey and Sheepen Bridge. This is where the focus of extraction will be for the next few years. Plans are already in place to restore quarries to the east of Cricklade as a large wetland reserve.

3.6 A Changing Landscape Character

Landscape character is constantly changing in response to natural and human influences, and this dynamic nature is particularly evident in the Cotswold Water Park. The exploitation of the sand and gravel deposits within the Upper Thames Valley has been a potent force for change.

The previous landscape character principally comprised floodplain pastoral farmland and riverine habitats, together with areas of arable land. With the progressive restoration of the areas that have been subject to mineral extraction, this riverine and pastoral landscape has been radically altered and replaced by a network of numerous man made lakes contained by vegetation ranging from mature and semi-mature woodlands and scrub to emerging juvenile areas of planting. The extensive areas of wetland landscape are a dominant influence on landscape character. However, a mosaic of pastoral

and arable farmland also threads through the designated Water Park and beyond within the wider study area, forming the setting for this extensive area of inland water. The areas that have escaped mineral extraction are evidence of the landscape character that would have prevailed had mineral extraction not taken place. The simple, quiet rural character that prevails in these areas provides a foil to the busier extraction and water focused activities of the core areas of the Water Park.

3.7 Landscape Character Assessment

This Landscape Character Assessment of the Cotswold Water Park describes and classifies the character of the study area's landscape at 2006/7 and provides a baseline resource for the evolving Strategic Review. In view of the dynamic nature of the Water Park, it captures a record at a single point in time of a constantly evolving and changing landscape character. It also provides a baseline record against which future changes can be compared and monitored.