



**CHARACTER AREAS**

**4A Chelworth Rolling Clay Lowland**

**5.4.1 Key Characteristics**

- Gently rolling lowland underlain by Oxford Clay or alluvial deposits;
- Wetland features on the lower ground, including small streams, open water ditches and marked by lines of mature willows;
- Mixed arable and pastoral land use, but with a predominance of pasture, and some ridge and furrow patterns evident;
- Variable field pattern ranging from small and irregular, to medium sized and regular shaped enclosures with a network of continuous hedgerows and mature oak and ash hedgerow trees;
- Limited woodland cover but some ancient woodland and wet woodland of high ecological value in the wider area plus scattered mature trees;
- Small number of wetland and meadows of neutral and unimproved grassland, and of nature conservation interest;
- Dispersed settlement of villages and farmsteads, generally on locally higher ground, many using vernacular materials of stone and local brick, half timber, tiles and thatch;
- Roads largely confined to minor and rural;
- Views often contained by intact hedgerows, riparian vegetation and woodland blocks with intermittent more open views to the rising slopes of the Settled Limestone Ridge and across the Upper Thames floodplain; and
- A largely peaceful, rural landscape.



**5.4.2 Rolling Clay Lowland Farmland within the Cotswold Water Park Study Area**

The Rolling Clay Lowland Farmland occupies a small area in the central southern part of the study area that extends southwards from Cricklade to the boundary of the study area, near the village of Purton Stoke. It forms part of a much broader area of Rolling Clay Lowland that extends beyond the study area to the north of Wootton Bassett and to the eastern side of Malmesbury.

While the descriptions that follow are applicable to the broader Landscape Character Type, they are principally focused towards the area within and to the south of the Cotswold Water Park study area.

**5.4.3 Landscape Character**

The Rolling Clay Lowland Farmland comprises a gently undulating lowland landscape on heavy clay soils. Within the study area the landscape type forms a transition between the River Basin Clay Vale and rising land to the south. The land use predominantly comprises mixed farming, enclosed by a strong hedgerow network with mature trees, and a dispersed settlement pattern.

#### 5.4.4 Physical Influences

The Rolling Clay Lowland Landscape Type is a gently undulating lowland landscape underlain by the Oxford Clay Formation Mudstones. Levels range from around 80m AOD adjacent to the Clay Vale to 130m in the wider area to the south-west of Minety, but limited to a maximum of 114m AOD within the study area. Rising above these general levels are locally pronounced undulations and hillocks which assume a local significance in contrast to the generally lower lying landform. Notable examples in the study area comprise the conical form of Hailstone Hill (105m AOD) to the north-west of Cricklade, Common Hill (114m AOD) to the south-west of the town, and close to the perimeter of the study area, a small hill (105m AOD) to the south-east of Blakehill Farm.

The River Key is the principal watercourse within study area although the wider area is drained by a series of streams and brooks, notably the Derry and Swill Brooks to the west. A tributary of the Thames, the Key rises to the west of Red Lodge Plantation and flows north-eastwards, joining the main river to the east of Cricklade. The study area is therefore located entirely within the catchment of the River Key and the network of minor watercourses and ditches that drain into it.

The clay geology and the many small watercourses give rise to seasonally wet soils of deep clay and loam to clayey soil over shale.

Although there are no significant stands of woodland in the study area, there are notable areas to the south of Minety which form remnants of the Royal Hunting Forest of Braydon. Here there are a number of ancient and semi-natural woodlands including the largest semi-natural remnant of the Forest, Ravensroost Wood SSSI, a botanically rich wet ash-wych elm and wet ash-maple woodland with a coppice with standards structure that is a legacy of many years of consistent management. Another notable stand of woodland comprises Red Lodge Plantation and the contiguous Battlelake Plantation to the south-west of Purton Stoke. These are also ancient woodlands and form part of an extensive parkland estate.

#### 5.4.5 Human Influences

There is evidence of a long period of occupation of the area with the establishment of Cricklade in the Saxon period, as well as the earlier Roman occupation, including the construction of Ermin Way.

The character of the wider area of Rolling Clay Lowland in the northern section of Wiltshire is linked to the influence of its historic land use as part of the Royal Hunting Forest of Braydon. Substantial blocks of woodland dominate the central part of the area, including some where traditional maintenance methods are still in place as at Ravensroost Wood SSSI and a remnant of wood pasture at Somerford Common. Fields are medium to large, mainly pastoral with a strong hedgerow network in good condition with many mature oak hedgerow trees.

#### 5.4.6 Buildings and Settlement

Settlement within the wider area of the Rolling Clay Lowland generally follows a pattern of sparsely scattered small nucleated villages with farmsteads together with occasional larger settlements and small towns. The central area is crossed by straight minor roads with intermittent dwellings scattered along them and at crossroads, and small nucleated villages such as Minety and Upper Minety.

Buildings tend to be of stone with stone slated roofs at the west of the area, such as at Charlton, with brick built buildings and tiled roofs and render more frequent to the east reflecting the widespread use of the local clay and the change from Limestone to Clay geology.

#### 5.4.7 Landscape Character Areas

##### 4A Chelworth Rolling Clay Lowland

The Chelworth Rolling Clay Lowland Character Area extends southwards from Cricklade and the lower lying wetlands of the Thames River Basin Clay Vale, and beyond the study area boundary, towards the villages of Purton Stoke in the south and Minety in the west. There is a gradual transition from the flatter landscapes in the north and east, at about 85m AOD, to the undulating or rolling land that rises up to 100m AOD on the perimeter of the area. Consistent with this change in topography, the area forms a transition between the flatter, wetter landscapes with some open water ditches and waterside willows, through to a more pastoral landscape of mixed pasture and arable with mature hedgerows and hedgerow oak trees.

The area lies almost entirely on Oxford Clay, a heavy blue-grey clay, with an arm of alluvial deposits running south-west through the area from the Thames floodplain along the course of the River Key, and also along the River Ray to the east of the Character Area. The clay gives rise to heavy soils which support mainly permanent pasture, but also arable cultivation in places. Field sizes vary from small and irregular, especially in the east of the area and close to the River Key, to medium sized regular fields from later periods of enclosure. Whilst hedgerows in good condition are typical as field boundaries, some stone walls are also found, especially in the vicinity of settlements.

Where lowland meadows are agriculturally unimproved, grassland communities are usually hay meadows except where subject to frequent or prolonged flooding when swamp or inundation communities are more common.

Cricklade is the principal centre of population, located on the slightly higher ground above the Thames floodplain, with the land rising to the immediate west of the town and containing the 20th century expansion of the residential area. The town is a Saxon settlement, founded in the 9th century, although there is strong evidence locally of Roman occupation, including their construction of a permanent crossing over the Thames at Calcutt, to the east of Cricklade, to carry the Ermin Way (A 419). The Saxons established the principal

road layout that is still present, and created a fortified town raising earthen ramparts around the settlement. These were later replaced by masonry walls around the 11th century. The historic core of the town focuses on a high street of terraced two and three storey buildings, with a diversity of building materials from timber framed to stone and brick, many of medieval origin. The distinctive church spire of St Sampson's forms a memorable landmark in the flat or undulating landscape.

Beyond Cricklade, settlement is dispersed throughout the area and often located on locally elevated ground. Examples include the farm and hamlet on the slopes and summit area of Hailstone Hill, and the settled slopes and summit area of Common Hill to the west of Cricklade. Cricklade Hotel and Country Club is located on the summit area, and includes a golf course, together with the linked hamlets of Chelworth Upper Green and Chelworth Lower Green extending across the south-east facing slopes of the hill. Other settlement comprises hamlets and farmsteads such as Purton Stoke, immediately beyond the study area.



Most vernacular buildings are built of limestone from the Cotswolds, with brick and clay or stone roof tiles also in evidence. The use of local clay as a building material has been evident from Roman times, with brick, tile or ceramic kilns found at Minety and Purton, again beyond the study area, but part of the wider Character Area.

To the south-west of Cricklade, the former RAF Blakehill Airfield was acquired by the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust in 2000 to establish the Blakehill Nature Reserve. Once the home of Dakotas that served in World War II, including the Battle of Arnhem, the airfield is now being restored to a extensive hay meadow, benefiting from a grassland cover that has been part of a non-intensive grazing regime for some years. The goal is to restore the entire site to wildflower-rich status in 15-20 years. In addition to the rich flora, the area will support a range of fauna including roe deer, brown hare and skylarks.

Although woodland is largely absent from the area, the large plantation at Red Lodge containing the house and farm, forms a significant visual backdrop to views in the western part of the area. While views are often constrained by the intervening hedges in the gently undulating ground, glimpses to the higher ground to the south forming the hills of Purton and Broad Blunsdon are evident, as well as wide views over the Thames Clay Vale to the north.