NORTHERN WOLDS
LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREA 6

LOCATION AND BOUNDARIES

The Northern Wolds Landscape character area forms a broad north-south strip to the western side of Huntingdonshire, extending from the Nene Valley in the north to the Southern Wolds to the south east. To the east are the Central Claylands.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- A strong topography of ridges bisected by pronounced valleys.
- Valleys are well vegetated and intimate in scale, while ridges/plateaux feel more open.
- An historic landscape, containing many medieval features.
- Dispersed pattern of historic villages, with little modern development.
- Distinctive square church towers topped with spires form characteristic landmarks.
FORMATIVE INFLUENCES

Two processes have been particularly important in the shaping of the Northern Wolds: landform and medieval settlement.

This area contains the highest land in Huntingdonshire, a result of layers of glacial till being deposited on the underlying rock. The distinctive ridged topography has been formed by streams flowing downhill from this higher land, towards the Fens and the Central Claylands. The streams have eroded pronounced valleys, which are very different in character from the higher land that they divide.

The heavy clay soil was not ploughed until the Medieval period, when a series of regularly spaced villages were established. Most of the settlements in this area are mentioned in the Domesday Book. There were also other Medieval settlements, such as Washington, which have been abandoned and today exist only as earthworks. Medieval influence is still strongly visible in the landscape of the Northern Wolds, and is reflected in the high number of Scheduled Ancient Monuments.

In addition to the existing villages and field patterns, the landscape contains numerous archaeological sites of manors, fishponds, managed woodland, ancient hedges and ridge and furrow. Ridge and furrow is usually visible on land currently used as pasture, and looks like long shallow strips of raised earth, in a ‘corrugated’ pattern. It was caused by repeated ploughing of strip fields in Medieval times.

A further influence on the landscape is the development of the distinctive ecclesiastical architecture of the district. The church towers, with their spires on square bases, are characteristic landmarks in the area.

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

The landscape character of the Northern Wolds is achieved through the distinctive and repeated pattern of ridges, valleys and settlements. The ridges are generally in arable production. They have a relatively open feel, with long views and few hedgerow trees. In contrast, the valleys have a higher proportion of land in pastoral use. They feel more enclosed and intimate in scale, due to the lack of views out, and the smaller field sizes. They are also more vegetated, with large mixed hedgerows containing ancient and young oaks. The streams in the valley bottoms are narrow. The routes of the watercourses can often be discerned by a line of trees along the bank.
In the northern part of the Northern Wolds, where the topography is less pronounced and settlement is sparser, the large rectilinear fields hedged with hawthorn are typical of 'enclosure fields', planned in the early 19th Century. There are also examples of ridge-top woodlands of oak and ash.

Villages are regularly spaced, linked by straight roads and closely associated with the field pattern. Aerial photographs of the area show extensive patterns of ridge and furrow in the fields around the villages. Most villages are situated in a similar position near the tops of the valley sides, so the church spires stand out on the horizon. Some villages are clustered around village greens, whereas others are more linear in form. They have seen relatively little modern development, 20th Century buildings being largely restricted to infill development. Vernacular styles and materials are much in evidence, including timber framing, thatch and render, as well as occasional examples of limestone buildings in the northwest.

Villages generally contain many trees and therefore have a wooded appearance in distant views. In addition to numerous small villages, the area contains the historic core of the larger settlement of Kimbolton-an attractive former coaching town dominated by a neo-classical stately home.

HUMAN RESPONSE

The Northern Wolds Landscape character area generates a very positive response from visitors, and is regarded by many as being amongst the most attractive countryside in the district. This is due to a combination of factors, including the harmonious character and relative tranquillity of much of the area, the varied topography (particularly the sense of enclosure and elevation) and the traditional villages.

The repeating patterns of topography, and changes in the scale of the landscape between ridges and valleys creates a rhythm which is particularly strong when travelling north-south through the area. Where

Buckworth village is an excellent example of a Northern Wolds village: situated almost at the top of the hill, it appears on the skyline as a wooded feature, dominated by its church tower. In the foreground on the right hand side of the picture, there are faint traces of ridge and furrow.
the A14 passes through the Northern Wolds, tranquillity is reduced, but the visual impact of the road on the surrounding area is localised.

LOOKING FORWARD

The historic nature of many of the landscape features in this area, for example roads, hedgerows and villages means that their removal or alteration not only has a visual impact on the landscape, but also erodes its fabric, and therefore its intrinsic character.

Non-scheduled archaeological features are at risk of being lost through ploughing, and many earthwork features, such as those of Washingley castle are hidden by overgrowth. The landscape is vulnerable to changes in farming practice and new developments, which may occur at any scale, from improvements to the A14 to new gates and fences in fields.

Villages are also vulnerable to unsympathetic extensions or development that threaten the character of the settlement, through their location, form or style. Kimbolton has particular problems in combining its historic street pattern with access for vehicles. It is necessary to address these issues in future planning and management in the area.

Some key issues

The Northern Wolds are an attractive and relatively unspoilt area of countryside with a strong historical character. They are a sub division of the much larger Western Claylands identified within the Cambridgeshire Landscape Guidelines, and broad landscape management and improvement principles are included within pages 54 to 57 of the Guidelines. In relation to the Northern Wolds, key issues include:

- Protection and enhancement of the distinctive characters of the valley and plateaux landscapes through the protection of smaller fields and meadows in the valleys, and the maintenance of long views from the upland areas.
- Preservation and interpretation of archaeological features, with improved public access where appropriate.
- Protection of key views towards the distinctive skyline of ridge tops, church towers and woodland.
- Protection and enhancement of historic settlement character through good siting and design of new buildings, and maintenance of village greens.
- Protection of the parkland setting to Kimbolton village and School, and improving traffic management in the village.
- Protection of the existing watercourses. Opportunities to improve the nature conservation value of the streams should be explored.
- Protection of ancient hedgerows and oaks within the valleys.
GRAFHAM WATER
LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREA 7

LOCATION AND BOUNDARIES

The Grafham Water landscape character area is defined and dominated by the wide expanse of open water at Grafham Water and its associated landscape setting. The area is surrounded by the Southern Wolds Landscape character area.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- Landscape dominated by the open water of Grafham Water reservoir which is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) for its large and varied bird populations.
- Woodlands and fields give the landscape around the reservoir a rural quality.
- Basin topography creates an inward looking landscape. The open expanse of the reservoir is not visible from the surrounding landscape.
- Recreation is a key activity, with facilities for sailing, fishing, walking and cycling.
- Contains buildings associated with the reservoir, e.g. water treatment works, pumping stations.
FORMATIVE INFLUENCES

Graffham Water reservoir was constructed in the 1960s, in a basin within a clay plateau. The large dam is at the eastern end of the reservoir. The reservoir’s form is functional; firstly to store water, and secondly to provide opportunities for recreation.

Prior to flooding, the key land uses in the area were arable land and woodland, and these land uses continue on the land surrounding the reservoir. In addition, recreational facilities have developed around the reservoir, including the distinctive sailing club building, modelled on the bridge of an ocean liner.

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

Graffham Water is a landscape with a strong ‘sense of place’. It is a unique landscape within Huntingdonshire, dominated by open water. However, its elevated position, at 50m AOD, high above the surrounding land level instantly makes it feel unnatural. This sense of the lake being imposed on the landscape is increased by the lack of treatment of much of the edge of the reservoir. Tree planting has been undertaken on the most accessible shores, but for many stretches of the reservoir, the shoreline consists of an abrupt and unvegetated edge between land and water. This is particularly noticeable when the reservoir is full.

The shallow ridge which surrounds the lake, and provides its backdrop, is not high enough to give the lake a memorable setting. It is, however, enough to enclose views of the water and give the whole area an introverted character.

Structures within the area are associated with water management and recreational functions and include the reservoir dam and towers, water treatment works, visitor centres, sailing club, bike shop etc. The landscapes surrounding these recreational facilities are strongly influenced by their function, with expanses of amenity grassland and car parks surrounding the visitors centre. Other man-made structures, unrelated to the reservoir but visible within the view include pylons, masts and the tower of Graffham village church which can be seen on the horizon.

The sails of boats on the reservoir add a dynamic element to the landscape, and become focal points for observers. A concentration of boats occurs around the sailing club on the southern shore.