

3.0 NORTHAMPTONSHIRE'S ENVIRONMENTAL CHARACTER

3.2.13 WEST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE UPLANDS



An extensive area stretching from Aynho in the south to Wilbarston in the north, the West Northamptonshire Uplands is an expansive and elevated landscape of hills and valleys that acts as the major watershed between some of the region's principal rivers systems. The varied local landscape character across the Uplands is an integral part of its distinctiveness.

The landscape is underlain by the intractable Lias Group Clays, which are capped locally by the ironstone bearing Marlstone Rock and Northampton Sand Formations. These result in well defined features such as steeply sloping prominent hills that contrast to softer landscapes where capping by a thick mantle of Boulder Clay has occurred. Despite the uniformity of character, local variation exists, with a significant difference occurring between the gentler north and hillier south of the area. Further variation has occurred where differences in the underlying geology have affected semi natural habitats and agricultural land uses.

The area consists of an arc of high, rounded hills that drain inwards to a major basin that form the catchment of the upper reaches of the Nene. The hills also act as a major watershed, draining to a number of juvenile rivers including the Warwickshire Avon, Leam and Cherwell to the west, the Welland to the north and to the Tove / Ouse to the south.

In the central and northern section of the area, where landform rises to form broad hills and high ridges, the landscape has a rolling, gently hilly character with long level views that are criss-crossed by a regular pattern of hedgerows with frequent ash trees. Settlement tends to lie within sheltered valleys although some hill top villages do exist, such as Naseby, West Haddon and Cold Ashby. The relative scarcity of settlement, combined with the infrequency of the isolated farms and cottages, gives that landscape a remote and sometimes isolated character. Expansive views and a sense of openness prevail on elevated lands, while an intimate character typifies the valleys.

A particularly hilly zone lies to the south of Daventry where the undulations are sharper and more frequent, as the glacial Boulder Clay that softens landscapes further to the north is less frequent here. Fields are generally smaller and settlement more frequent. Woodland is not characteristic of this hilly zone, with small farm and parkland copses and linear belts along roads and disused rail lines being the most significant woodland component. However, an arc of acidic woodland near Badby is a local characteristic and important wildlife asset, with key sites being Badby Wood and Everdon Stubbs. Badby Wood has been continuously wooded for over seven hundred years and Everdon Stubbs is important as it displays variation in woodland composition as a result of variations in the underlying geology. Other forms of acidic habitat exist where the underlying geology influences land cover. For example, on Borough Hill over the Northampton Sand Formation, heathland survives and contributes significantly to local biodiversity, this being an increasingly fragmented and shrinking habitat type within the county.

Valley villages tend to have an enclosed, well treed and sheltered character, in sharp contrast to the open and more exposed hills and areas of higher ground. Whilst brick and ironstone houses are most numerous, cob built houses are characteristic of numerous villages, particularly to the east and north of Daventry. These modest vernacular dwellings represent a sharp contrast to the grand stately homes and mansions that are also located throughout the landscape. The majority of grand houses are surrounded by extensive parkland areas, which form an important landscape resource in themselves, contributing to landscape and historic character as well as biodiversity resources in some cases. The influence of the house is also often to be found in the neighbouring landscape and particularly in estate villages where a uniformity of architectural styles, materials and detailing indicate centralised control over development at some point. Many villages are served by minor roads, adding to their sense of remoteness, although larger villages around the edge of the area are becoming increasingly altered with the imposition of modern development.

Enclosure was being undertaken from the 15th century onwards, however, the predominant field pattern across the area is that of parliamentary enclosure. The regular and rectilinear 'grid' of field boundaries has been imposed on the hilly landscape, with hedgerow boundaries emphasising



Blackdown Masts

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relief and forming strong patterns that are visible when viewed from lower elevations. The planned character of the landscape is further emphasised by straight wide enclosure roads that can often be found along ridgelines. The pattern is showing signs of fragmentation, however, due to hedgerow removal in the last half of the 20th century. Localised examples of pre parliamentary enclosure patterns survive, such as at Thornby. These old field patterns contrast to the significant areas of modern fieldscapes that exist to the north of Daventry and Northamptonshire, where hedgerow removal has been extensive enough to render the modern fieldscape the dominant pattern.

Evidence of prehistoric settlement and activity is sparse. Iron Age settlement on the high hills at Arbury Hill and Borough Hill, the latter with fortifications of late Bronze Age origins, are tangible evidence of pre Roman activity in the area and prominent landscape features in themselves. The pattern of settlements across the landscape that is evident today dates to the early and mid Saxon period, with place names attesting to the spread of farmsteads (tons) from river valleys onto higher ground, and forest clearance. Place names also suggest Scandinavian settlement.

Up to the 14th century populations rose and settlement expanded, with a familiar pattern of nucleated villages surrounded by open fields in ridge and furrow cultivation. However, major events that occurred from the mid 14th century, meant that populations declined and settlements were deserted or shrank. The reasons are numerous, but the limited quality of the land for arable farming would have been a contributory factor. Ambitious landlords accumulated large tracts of land for sheep grazing, although it is not always clear whether this process was the cause of widespread depopulation or a benefit of migration caused by another factor. The process is not unique to this landscape and was widespread throughout the county and indeed, it is well known for the frequency of its deserted settlements and ridge and furrow overlaid by a mixture of Tudor and parliamentary enclosure hedges.

Land cover is primarily improved agriculture, with arable and pastoral farming evident in equal measure, creating an attractive patchwork rural landscape. Cereal production tends to be located on gentler land such as the level ground of ridge tops, particularly those on the Northampton Sand Formation which are freer draining and as a result well suited to Autumn sown cereals and ley grassland. Here hedges can be low, and hedgerow trees infrequent, in contrast to the denser hedgerow patterns surviving in predominantly pasture areas on the gentler valley slopes and lowlands, typically over Lias Group Clays, where ridge and furrow and the earthworks of deserted settlements are significant landscape features. Arable areas display signs of hedgerow removal and field amalgamation, however, field patterns with predominantly pastoral land uses are more intact. Permanent grasslands are characteristic of steeply sloping land, although diversity and wildlife value is diminished as a result of fertiliser application with acidic grasslands being lost as a result.

Beyond the major settlements of Northampton and Daventry, both of which saw major expansion in the late 20th century as a New Town or planned overspill for the West Midlands respectively, the otherwise rural and remote character of the landscape is compromised by major transport infrastructure. The M1 corridor is a significant component of the landscape and its course through the uplands is indicative of a long established and exploited routeway through the neighbouring uplands.



Fawsley Park / Badby Down

KEY ISSUES

- The Uplands are an expansive and elevated landscape with an arc of high rounded hills and valleys. A capping of ironstone bearing Marlstone Rock and Northampton Sand Formation has resulted in well defined landform features with steeply sloping prominent hills that contrast to softer landscapes where capping by a thick mantle of Boulder Clay has occurred. They local variations are an integral part of the wider character of the area and as such development and land management should be appropriate to local conditions.
- The arc of hills marks a major watershed, draining to a number of juvenile rivers including the Nene, Warwickshire Avon, Leam and Cherwell to the west, the Welland to the north and to the Tove / Ouse to the south. Land management and development should consider the impact of run off and pollution in this area, given that numerous water courses could be affected.

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- In the central and northern section of the area, the landscape has a rolling, gently hilly character with long level views across wide areas. New development and land management should conserve and enhance viewing opportunities across the landscape.
- There is a general absence of large settlements and a remote and sometimes isolated character prevails across the hilly rural landscape. The valleys tend to be more settled and new development should be concentrated in existing valley settlements. Any development of the few hill top villages should seek to avoid extending down onto the hill slopes.
- Valley villages tend to have an enclosed, well treed and sheltered character, in sharp contrast to the open and more exposed hills and areas of higher ground. New development in the valleys should utilise existing and newly planted vegetation to assist integration.
- A particularly hilly zone lies to the south of Daventry where fields are generally smaller and settlement more frequent. Woodland is not characteristic of this hilly zone, although opportunities exist to strengthen and extend the pattern of small farm and parkland copses and linear belts along roads and disused rail lines.
- The arc of acidic woodland near Badby is a local characteristic and important wildlife asset with key sites comprising Badby Wood and Everdon Stubbs. Land managers should be encouraged to extend the acidic woodland resource in this area and where possible establish appropriate habitat linkage.
- On Borough Hill, heathland survives and contributes significantly to local biodiversity. Land managers should be encouraged to extend this area of habitat.
- Modest vernacular dwellings in cob characterise many villages, particularly to the east and north of Daventry. New development should seek to integrate with existing structures in terms of scale and use of materials.
- The influence of the grand stately homes is also often to be found in the neighbouring landscape and particularly in estate villages where a uniformity of architectural styles, materials and detailing indicate a centralised control. New development in these villages should respect the estate character, architecture and use of materials.
- Many villages are served by minor roads, adding to their sense of remoteness. The rural character of the road network should be maintained.
- The planned character of the landscape is emphasised by the regular and rectilinear 'grid' of hedged field boundaries that emphasise relief and form strong patterns that are visible when viewed from lower elevations, and by straight wide enclosure roads that can often be found along ridgelines. The hedgerow and enclosure road network is showing signs of fragmentation, and land managers should be encouraged to maintain the neat geometric patterns created by field and roadside hedges.
- Localised examples of pre parliamentary enclosure patterns survive, such as at Thornby. These 'old' field patterns contrast to the significant areas of modern fieldscapes and should be protected and enhanced. Traditional management techniques could be employed on these older hedgerow networks, contrasting to the modern machine flailed character of the later parliamentary field boundaries.
- Iron Age settlement on the high hills at Arbury Hill and Borough Hill, the latter with fortifications of late Bronze Age origins, are tangible evidence of pre Roman activity in this hilly area. The setting and legibility of these landscape monuments should be enhanced where possible, and managed to enhance the nature conservation value of the sites.
- A patchwork of arable and pastoral land uses characterises the area and this should be maintained in order to retain the visual appeal of the landscape. Cereal production tends to be located on gentler land and particularly those on the Northampton Sand Formation, which are freer draining. Here, hedgerows tend to be low and hedgerow trees less frequent. This contrasts with the denser hedgerow patterns surviving in predominantly pasture areas on the gentler valley slopes and lowlands. Ridge and furrow and the earthworks of deserted settlements are significant landscape features in these pastoral landscapes and opportunities exist to enhance the biodiversity value of these areas by less intensive agricultural practices and the reinstatement of species rich grassland habitat.
- Northampton and Daventry fringe these landscapes and opportunities exist to enhance the rural urban fringe by appropriate land management and new development, and limit the urbanising influence of the towns on the otherwise rural landscape. The M1 corridor is also a significant urbanising component of the landscape and measures should be taken to limit the visual and acoustic impact this has on the surrounding landscape.