

Rockingham Forest



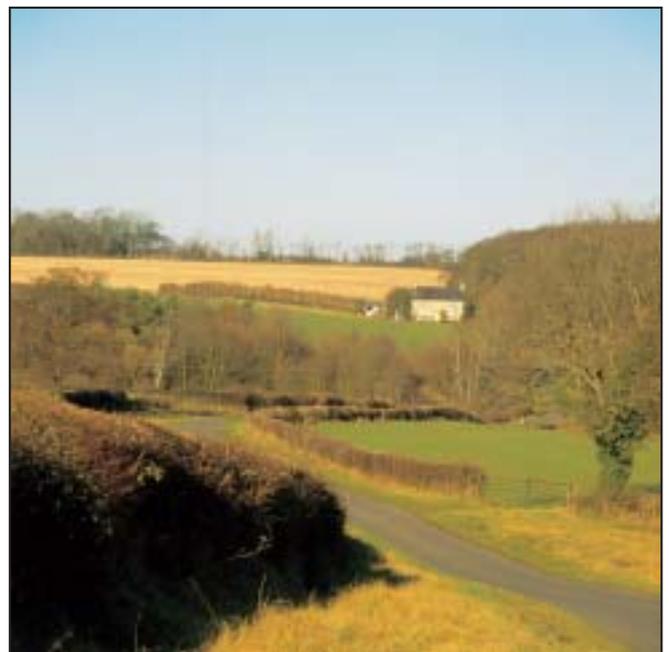
Key Characteristics

- Undulating landform rising to prominent scarp along edge of Welland Valley in Rockingham Forest.
- Large woodlands on higher ground enclose the landscape.
- High historic and nature-conservation interest in woodlands.
- Remnants of unimproved grassland throughout, with limestone heaths and fragments of acid bogs in the Soke of Peterborough.
- Foreground views are occupied by large arable fields with low hedges.
- Large mature landscape parks and country houses.
- Dry stone walls around villages, becoming more common in open countryside in Soke of Peterborough.
- Nucleated villages often in sheltered streamside locations.
- Distinctive buildings constructed in local stone: ironstone in west, limestone in east.
- Undisturbed, deeply rural quality despite nearby towns and adjoining trunk roads.
- Prominent, disused ironstone quarries (gulleys) and abandoned second world war airfields.
- A sharp transition between the countryside and the main towns of Kettering, Corby and Peterborough (lying just outside the area) which have developed rapidly in recent years.

Landscape Character

The area is defined in the north-west by a steep scarp which overlooks the Welland valley and decreases to much more gentle landforms around the northern edge of the Soke of Peterborough. To the south-east, it is bordered by the Nene valley and, to the east, by the urban edge of

Peterborough. In the south-west it ends against the open clay vales of Northamptonshire and the town of Kettering. It comprises two culturally distinct sub-units, the Rockingham Forest and Soke of Peterborough, which nevertheless share many similar physical characteristics. The Rockingham Forest area takes its title from the royal hunting forest that existed across the area from the 11th to 19th centuries. The Forest's modern extent is defined by a combination of these former legal boundaries and its physical characteristics. The Soke of Peterborough was also a distinct administrative area for many centuries and this title is conveniently used here to define the physically distinctive countryside to the west of Peterborough.



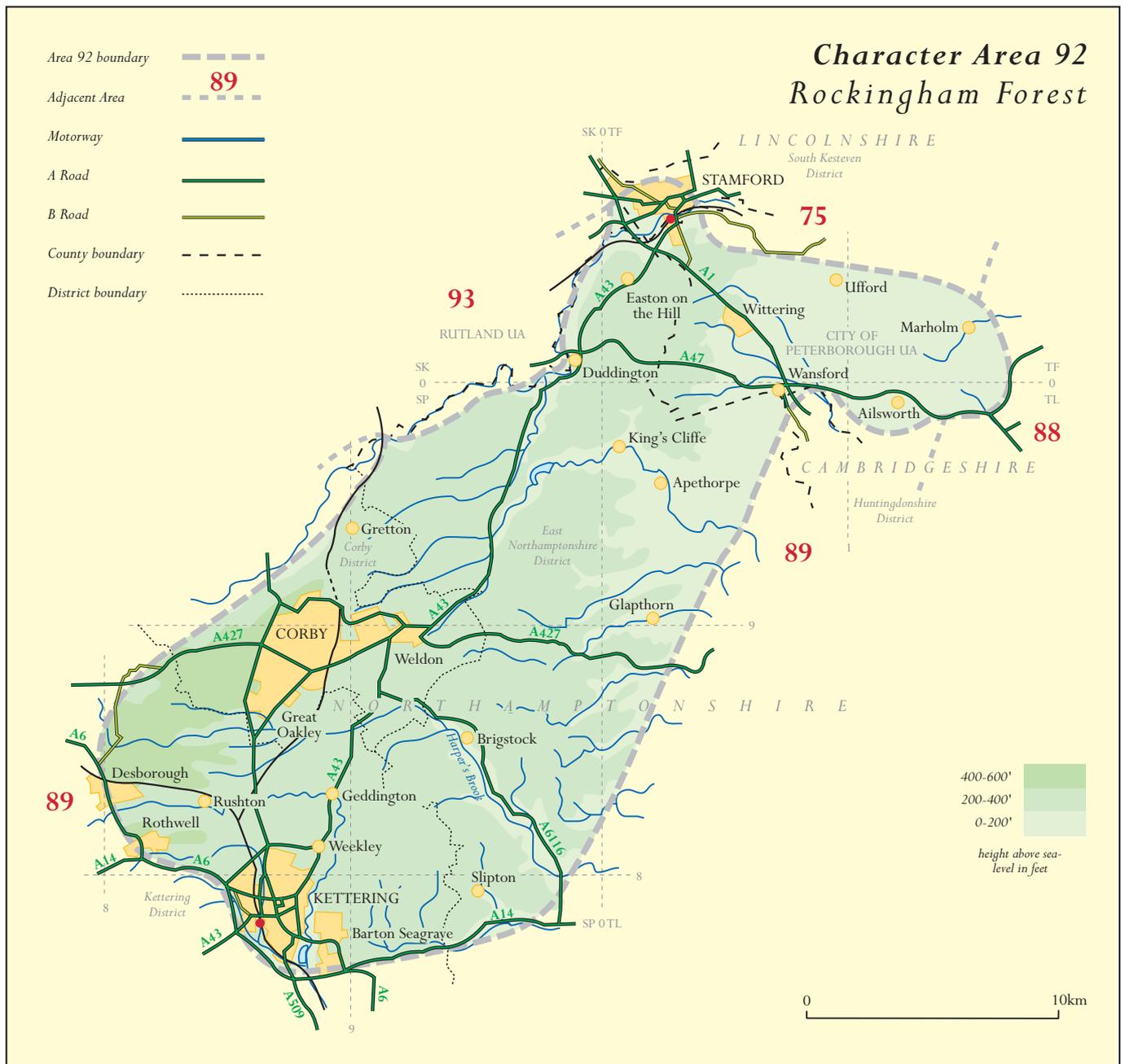
MIKE WILLIAMS/COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY

Mixed landscape in Rockingham Forest with arable fields, deciduous woodland and thick hedges.

Separated today by the A1 corridor, the Rockingham Forest and Soke of Peterborough areas are unified by the common west/north and east/south boundaries of the respective Welland and Nene rivers. The areas also share similar geology and architecture and have much more in common with each other than their neighbouring landscapes. Extensive areas of ancient woodland are a particularly strong unifying characteristic.

Although the landform of Rockingham Forest is essentially a broad, low, undulating ridge falling away from the northern scarp, the highest points are capped by glacial boulder clay and it is here that the surviving ancient woodlands lie, emphasising the relief. Extensive woodlands like Wakerley, Geddington Chase and Fermyn are prominent features on the skyline. To the north, the land slopes into lower ground where the Jurassic limestones, including the Cornbrash, are exposed and river gravels are present towards Peterborough and the Nene valley. Here there are varied remnants of semi-natural vegetation like the limestone heaths of Castor Hanglands and the species-rich limestone grassland of Barnack Hills and Holes lying over abandoned medieval quarries for the famous Barnack Stone. However, here too, there are frequent ancient woodlands. Many are of high nature-conservation interest and are attractive landscape features in their own right. They were formerly extensively coppiced and small-leaved lime is a particular feature of the eastern woods.

Within the forest the woodlands are generally separated by large fields, mainly in arable use, which generally have low hedges and intermittent trees. However, there are also more enclosed areas of pasture with a better hedge structure, particularly in the valleys, as well as areas of dry stone walls. The Soke of Peterborough has many low hedges and wide horizons and areas with dry stone walls. Apart from the woodlands, the main tree cover comes from the frequent large historic parks like Rockingham, Deene, Drayton and Boughton with attractively sited mansions of the 17th to 19th centuries. Settlements generally lie off the boulder clay, along the valleys. Here, more easily cultivated land is exposed and typically there is a more intimate character than in the surrounding open countryside. The settlements are surrounded by small pasture fields, more robust hedgerows and occasional stone walls. Older buildings are generally of the creamy-grey limestone in the east and are often roofed with the distinctive Collyweston



Slate. In the west, ironstone is common. There is relatively little modern development within and around the villages, even in those settlements near the edge of Peterborough. They are served by minor country roads with the typical wide verges of the enclosure period, which often follow circuitous routes so that many areas are very remote and deeply rural.

Within the Forest, there is some variation in character. In the south there are enclosed wooded valleys with limestone and ironstone villages. The landform is quite steep and woodlands are of moderate size tending to cling to the valley sides or crown the ridges, with large-scale arable areas forming a backdrop above. In the valley floors, trees line the watercourses and views are contained by vegetation and landform. To the north, the landscape is on a larger scale and is almost exclusively woodland and arable. There are frequent views to the south but few to the north since the crest of the ridge above the Welland valley is almost continuously lined with woodland. There are patches of dry stone walls and isolated farmsteads.



MIKE WILLIAMS/COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY

Much of the Rockingham Forest is a mosaic of arable farmland with large to medium sized hedges. The large and significant woodlands are often found on the slightly thinner soils of the crests and ridges of the rolling landform.

A stronger distinction can be made between the Forest and the Soke of Peterborough, where the landform is lower and very gently rolling. The farming pattern is more mixed. There are both hedges and dry stone walls and the rectilinear pattern of parliamentary enclosure is very obvious. The woodlands provide enclosure but also frame long distance views, as they do in the Forest. At the southern edge, the area merges with the gravels of the Nene valley and low-lying grasslands and streamside pollards are present.

Physical Influences

The scarp and ridge which form the Rockingham Forest comprises mainly Jurassic limestones of the Great Oolite,

including Blisworth Limestone and Cornbrash. Along the river valleys, the Lincolnshire Limestone and Northampton Sand of the Inferior Oolite are exposed or near the surface. The Northampton Sand contains substantial deposits of ironstone. The higher ground is capped with boulder clay (glacial till) which gives rise to heavy intractable soils unattractive for cultivation. In the north, within the Soke of Peterborough, the land flattens out. Cornbrash and river gravels predominate near the surface, and the western margin of the area is strongly influenced by the alluvial clays and gravels along the Nene valley.

The ironstone deposits have been mined for centuries, most recently as strip mines, resulting in deep linear quarries known as 'gulleys', surrounded by extensive areas of spoil.

At the southern edge of the Forest, the Ise valley drains southwards towards the Nene. Harper's Brook drains south-eastwards across the area. Willow Brook, arising near the steep north-west escarpment, winds across the Forest to the Nene, to which shallow streams also flow within the Soke of Peterborough.

Historical and Cultural Influences

During the Neolithic and Bronze Age the freely draining soils of the valleys were cleared of woodland. There were significant settlement and ritual sites on the edge of the area within the Nene valley and the Soke around Fengate. Settlement and agriculture penetrated into the heart of the Forest along the Willow Brook. The Iron Age and Roman periods saw extensive settlement on the heavier claylands with the development of a major iron industry within the Forest. There was also a substantial Roman settlement at Castor where Ermine Street and King Street, which are still prominent landscape features today, meet. Substantial areas were cleared of woodland and large villas like Weldon and Barnack were established.

Woodland spread again after the Romans left and Saxon settlements lay mainly around the edge of the area as royal or former royal manors controlling the central woodlands. Indeed, the pattern of principal settlements lying around the edge of the Forest has persisted to the present day and the centre of the area remains sparsely settled. On the north-eastern edge, Meadhampstead, later to become Peterborough, was the site of one of the major monasteries of early Anglo-Saxon England. In the late Anglo-Saxon period there was again a period of expansion and clearance. Limestone was quarried in the northern part of the area, not least to produce the Saxon churches like Wittering and Barnack. In the Anglo-Saxon period, Barnack stone was transported, by waggons and boats, as far south as Stretthall in north-west Essex, Milton Bryant in Bedfordshire and Walton in Hertfordshire. By the early post-Conquest period most of the area had become royal forest and when the

bounds were first recorded in the late 13th century they stretched from the gates of Northampton to the gates of Stamford. By this time, following centuries of clearance, much of the land was in agricultural use in open fields surrounding nucleated villages. There were also isolated farmsteads cut out of the woodland and there were extensive areas of waste and common, particularly in the north east.

In the high Middle Ages, ironworking re-emerged as a major activity supported by one of England's largest charcoal industries. Limestone quarrying at Barnack and elsewhere proceeded apace. Barnack Stone and Weldon Stone became some of the most prized building materials of medieval England. The principal small towns, like Oundle and Kettering, lay in the valleys at the edge but there were lesser towns and market areas like Kings Cliffe and Brigstock nearer the centre. Royal and private deer parks developed. In many cases these formed the basis of the post-medieval landscape parks and country houses like Milton, Boughton and Apethorpe. The latter has been described as 'the most stately and coherent Jacobean piece in the county'.



ROCKINGHAM FOREST TRUST

Southwick Hall – the Forest has a wealth of historic houses both large and small.

The landscape of open fields and commons remained across much of the area until the 19th century although there were localised enclosures from the 16th century onwards, as around Milton. The iron industry petered out in the post-medieval period but, by the 1850s, the arrival of the railways led to the excavation of a chain of quarries from Blisworth near Northampton to Stamford and the rapid development of the towns of Corby and Kettering, as well as large villages on the edge of the Forest and clearance of some of the remaining woodland. In the present century, the industry has become centred in Corby. Although the steelworks closed in the 1970s, and the ironstone working has ceased, the tubeworks continue to operate. Industrial expansion based on a different range of industries took place at Peterborough, followed by the post-war development of a new town. This period has also seen an

increase in arable cultivation, with corresponding removal of hedges and loss of hedgerow trees giving the open agricultural land an abrupt contrast with the woodland.

The last change would have intrigued John Clare, the 18th century poet born at Helpston who recorded the loss of the open field landscape in a unique way:

'Fence meeting fence in owners little bounds
Of field and meadow, large as garden-grounds
In little parcels little minds to please,
With men and flock imprisoned at ease.'

Buildings and Settlement

The older vernacular buildings and smaller manor houses are usually built of stone from the immediate locality, with a gradual change from creamy-grey limestone in the east to brown ironstone around Corby. Many of the lesser buildings are of rubble or simple dressed stone construction, in contrast to the smaller manor houses and often imposing churches with their towers and spires. Although most of the more conspicuous elements of the latter date from the 13th to 15th centuries, there are significant earlier buildings in the east. Brick is used on the more recent buildings. Reddish colours are typical of the settlements around the edge of the Forest but, towards Peterborough, yellow Flettons are sometimes a striking contrast. Roofing materials are equally varied, with thatch, Collyweston Slates, red orange and buff clay pantiles and Welsh slate. Characteristically many of the roof pitches are steep to accommodate thatch and the heavy Collyweston Slate. The latter gives rise to some of the most attractive groups of buildings in the locality such as the estate village with distinctive hipped roofs at Deene.

The older village centres usually have simple buildings of rectangular plan set parallel to the line of the single main street, giving a pleasant fit to the landscape. Their uniformity of character is often the result of estate ownership. At the edges of the area the village character is more influenced by high density post-war housing. The towns of Corby, Kettering and Peterborough have extensive areas of 19th and early 20th century brick buildings with large modern industrial buildings and out of town shopping development on their outskirts. Peterborough's edge, however, is well-integrated with the substantial woodlands and extensive new town planting. Although the towns are served by trunk roads, the villages are linked by tortuous minor roads and this contributes to the remote character of much of the Forest. The A14 is the most conspicuous of recent roads and other prominent 20th century features include the extensive areas of the Corby iron and steel works and the second world war airfields.

The area contains many outstanding country houses, including Rockingham Castle, Deene Hall, Milton,

Drayton, Apethorpe and Boughton, with imposing fabric ranging from the 16th to the 19th centuries. Set within substantial parklands, they tend to have sheltered, rather than dramatic, settings.



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A typical feature of the forest are shallow ironstone workings known as gullets. They introduce wet and scrubby features into an otherwise 'tidy' wooded arable landscape.

Land Cover

Slightly more than 10 per cent of the area is occupied by woodlands and scrub. Many are ancient former coppice woods with a wide range of species. Small leaved lime is a particular feature in the east and the extensive glacial till woodlands are characterised by ash, hazel and field maple. There is some difficulty in separating primary from ancient secondary woodland within the forest, complicated by the rich pattern created by the formerly extensive grazing. Where patches of old grassland survive they are of particular value. In some cases the deciduous woodland has been converted or partially converted to coniferous woodlands and in others wholly new coniferous woodlands have been planted. Much recent planting has been on the reclaimed ironstone workings and the large estates such as Boughton.

Other areas of semi-natural vegetation include the important conservation grassland and scrublands at Castor Hanglands and the species-rich limestone grassland at Barnack Hills and Holes. There are patches of unimproved or semi-improved grassland, often marked by ridge and furrow and small areas of wetland on the valley floors. Unrestored ironstone gullets and spoil heaps and limestone quarries are also significant features, for example, north of the A14/A510.

However, most of the land is in agricultural use with a predominance of arable. Hedges are often low and hedgerow trees are localised in distribution, with willow pollards along the streamsides and wetter areas. Locally, and particularly in the north, there are areas of dry stone walls.

The Changing Countryside

- Most of the remaining coppice woodlands are falling into neglect because costs, lack of markets and deer damage prevent positive management.
- Other ancient woodland sites have been converted to mainly conifer high forest in recent years, though they retain some remnant flora and preserved archaeological features.
- The area's recent woodlands include a high proportion of even-aged, mixed and conifer woodland nearing maturity.
- Many of the area's older grasslands have been lost in recent times through improvement and cultivation and those that remain are consequently of increased importance.
- The historic parklands are designed landscapes from the 16th to 18th centuries and many are in need of appropriate restoration to a consistent design plan.
- Wet meadows, pollards and ponds are locally important riparian features that are becoming increasingly rare within the area's river valleys.
- Hedgerow removal and neglect has changed the field patterns and is having a significant impact on landscape character. This is compounded by the continued loss of hedgerow trees.
- Locally prominent stone walls face dereliction or have been inappropriately restored.
- Other linear features such as green lanes, railway lines and small streams and ditches connect different habitats to provide important visual links across the landscape which benefit wildlife and provide public access opportunities.
- Redundant quarries including unrestored ironstone gullets and spols, limestone quarries and gravel pits provide localised landscape and wildlife opportunities.
- Many of the area's traditional, stone farm buildings are redundant and in need of repair.
- The distinctive character of the area's stone built and nucleated villages is very vulnerable to intrusive new development on their edges.

Shaping the Future

- The Rockingham Forest Trust has initiated a range of projects and studies in the area in line with an overall vision of restoring the Forest landscape through the conservation, enhancement and appropriate extension of natural habitats and landscape features. It is important

that this work continues as a pre-requisite to promoting general good practice and as part of management planning for specific sites.

- Management considerations can be conveniently divided into three:

i) Conservation of Traditional Features and Habitats

- Developing and promoting mechanisms for cost-effective ancient woodland management and restoration within ancient woodland sites;
- Preparing and implementing historic parkland restoration plans;
- Conserving unimproved grasslands, meadows and other habitats through village landscape appraisals and other pro-active management;
- Identifying and conserving priority stone walls;
- Controlling development and promoting good building design practice within village environments.

ii) Enhancement of Agricultural Landscape

- Managing recent woodlands for multiple benefits;
- Planting new woodlands in strategic locations to accentuate wooded appearance of landscape, link existing habitats, screen development and provide community access;
- Recreating other habitats such as limestone grassland on set-aside land;
- Conserving and enhancing the best-preserved networks of hedgerows and establishing hedgerow trees in suitable locations;
- Managing and establishing green corridors, including ditches, headlands and green lanes, as visual and wildlife links across arable areas;
- Optimising multiple benefits from potential new crops such as short rotation coppice;
- Restoring and re-using redundant farm buildings.

iii) Recreation in Developed Landscapes

- Maintaining and managing redundant quarries for landscape and nature conservation;
- Enhancing airfields through woodland planting to heighten status as memorials, improve access and screen development.

Selected References

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The Rockingham Forest is relatively lightly settled, the villages are small and compact and the buildings, walls and associated features are characterised by a large percentage of local limestone building stone and tiles.