

Outstanding



The High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is a nationally important landscape. It was designated by Government in 1983 to conserve and enhance its historic character of rolling hills draped with small irregular fields, abundant woods and hedges, scattered farmsteads and sunken lanes.

The High Weald's distinctive countryside arises from a long history of human interaction with the natural environment. Its main features were established by the 14th century – and have survived major historical events and social and technological changes. What you are looking at is, essentially, a medieval landscape. The future conservation and evolution of this landscape is dependent upon safeguarding the traditional interactions between people and nature.

There are 50 AONBs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland – the largest being the Cotswolds and the smallest the Isles of Scilly. AONBs are part of a worldwide family of protected landscapes that are valued for their cultural richness, aesthetic quality and wildlife. In Britain, these landscapes are designated as AONB, National Park or Heritage Coast – all of equal landscape importance.

What does Weald mean?

The word 'Weald' comes from the German 'Wald' meaning an uncultivated wilderness.

How high is the High Weald?

The highest ridge, the Weald Forest Ridge, rises to 223 metres above sea level on Ashdown Forest. Firle Beacon – directly opposite on the South Downs – is only 217 metres above sea level.

How big is the High Weald?

The High Weald covers parts of four counties – East Sussex, West Sussex, Kent and Surrey. With an area of 570 square miles (1,457 square kilometres) it is the UK's fourth largest AONB.

Natural



The rocks of the High Weald were originally laid down as sandy and muddy sediments. Starting around 140 million years ago (when dinosaurs still roamed) these sediments formed at the bottom of shallow lakes, or were carried by rivers and deposited on floodplains.

Around 100 million years ago, sea levels rose and the remains of billions of tiny sea creatures then formed another layer of sediment above the sands and muds. Over time, this became chalk. Around 30 million years ago, massive earth movements began to push all the layers of sediment up, creating a giant, chalk-covered dome. Over time, water eroded most of the chalk away, revealing the older sandstones and clays beneath – the High and Low Weald. The chalk at the edges of the dome has remained – forming the North and South Downs.

The High Weald gets its rolling countryside from bands of the sandstone and clay. The hard sandstone forms the high ridges, running east-west. The softer clay is easily worn away: it forms the low valleys in between.

Eight thousand years ago, when Britain had recovered from the last ice age, the slopes of the High Weald would have been clothed in their natural vegetation: woodland with grassy and heathy clearings – precursors of today's fields and heaths, kept open by grazing wild cattle and horses.

Because of its geology and vegetation, the area held many riches for our ancestors. As human technology developed, the High Weald became an important source of raw materials for the iron, brick making and forestry industries. High Weald woods were relatively slow to be cleared – compared to those in the rest of Britain – because local people valued them for the resources they provided. By Domesday (1086) the High Weald remained the most densely wooded area of England.

The High Weald remained the most densely wooded area of England

Cultural



As well as timber and fuel, the High Weald woods held another important resource – acorns! From as far back as the Neolithic period (4300 – 1400BC) or even before, the woodlands of the High Weald were used by farmers from the South Downs, North Downs and coastal plains as a seasonal source of food for their livestock. Each autumn, they would drive their pigs into the woods to feed on acorns. This method of feeding pigs is known as pannage. The High Weald was the stronghold of pannage in Britain

Farmers from a particular village returned with their pigs to the same woodland place year after year. These isolated woodland pig pastures were called dens. In time, dens became permanent places of settlement (many keeping their 'den' place names to this day). The isolated, scattered nature of the original dens developed into a pattern of small, individual farmsteads dotted across the countryside. This pattern of settlement is characteristic of the High Weald today and supports the highest population of any protected landscape in the UK.

The frequent passage of pigs being driven to and from the dens formed tracks known as droves, connecting the dens to their parent villages – often 20 miles away. When the dens became settlements in their own right, the roughly north-south droving routes remained – and can be seen today in the pattern of lanes, bridleways and footpaths radiating away from the High Weald. The routes are often deeply sunken. This is due to the action of trotters, feet, hooves – and, later, wheels – wearing the soft ground away over many centuries of use.

As the dens became permanent dwellings, farmers began to claim the wild forest for new animal pastures in a piecemeal way. By the 14th century, pannage had ceased and the High Weald had become a landscape of woods, heathy commons and small, irregularly shaped fields – looking much as it does today.

The woods held another important resource – acorns!



Throughout history, the High Weald has been a productive landscape and local industries have all left their mark. The Romans and Tudors mined and smelted iron here on a huge scale and from the 15th to 17th centuries, the area supported a thriving woollen cloth industry. In the 18th century, hop gardens and beer making were widespread. Local people relied on the landscape for a range of products and services – including food and wood for fuel and building.

The High Weald is still a productive landscape today and its characteristic patchwork of fields and woods continues to be maintained by farmers and foresters. Without traditional management, wildlife species that depend upon grassland, heathland and working woodland suffer.

With its heavy clays, poor, sandy soils and steep hills, the High Weald has never been a good place to grow crops. Rearing domestic livestock has always been one of the main activities. Conker-coloured Sussex cattle and tough Romney Marsh sheep form a traditional part of this farmed landscape.

Though there are only a few hop producers still in business today, the High Weald is still associated with hops and beer making. The area is particularly suited to growing apples: orchards are scattered across the whole of the AONB, though mainly concentrated in the Kent High Weald. The soils and climate also seem to particularly suit the vine – and this is reflected in the number of vineyards to be found here. Woodlands still provide timber for post and rail fencing, woodland crafts such as the famous Sussex Trug and locally made charcoal.

Many of our producers sell their products locally. Look out for fruit, juice, wine, beer, cheese and meat in village, vineyard and farm shops, roadside stalls and farmers' markets – and on the menus of pubs and restaurants.

Patchwork of fields and woods maintained by farmers and foresters

High Weald producers at www.highweald.org

www.highweald.org



The High Weald is the largest AONB in South East England, where AONBs cover 33.4% of the region – a higher concentration than in any other region of the country.

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Published by the High Weald AONB Unit on behalf of the High Weald AONB Joint Advisory Committee and the Weald Forest Ridge Landscape Partnership.

The High Weald AONB Unit is a specialist team that advises on the management of this nationally valued landscape; promotes understanding of the area's special qualities and enables action to conserve it.

Photography by Janina Holubecki unless otherwise indicated.

Linocut illustrations by Charlotte Molesworth.

Design by Angel Design www.angeldesign.org.uk



LOTTERY FUNDED



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www.highweald.org

Cared for

The High Weald AONB Management Plan sets out local authority policy for the High Weald AONB, acts as a guide to statutory organisations and suggests ways in which residents can care for the area. The plan has been produced by the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee, an established partnership between the 15 local authorities whose areas are covered by the AONB designation.

Policy makers can only do so much. Everyone with an interest in the AONB has a role to play in its future management. Through individual actions – both large and small – residents, visitors and businesses can contribute significantly to the care of the High Weald AONB.

A charter for residents & visitors

The following are actions that all residents, visitors and businesses can take to help care for this nationally important landscape.

Buy local products and services from farmers and woodland managers who actively manage their land to benefit the environment.

The landscape and wildlife value of the area's woodlands, hedges, meadows, heathlands and field margins are dependent on traditional management. Money invested in products and services that help support this management is money invested in conserving the AONB and its local economy.

Help prevent the spread of invasive and harmful plant and animal species

Introduced plant, animal and fish species spread rapidly in the High Weald countryside, competing with our native wildlife and leading to its loss.

Reduce, reuse and recycle – and dispose of all litter responsibly

Litter spoils enjoyment of the countryside for the majority of residents. Less rubbish means less pressure for landfill sites and incinerators in the AONB.

Use less water

Demands for water lead to high levels of water extraction, damaging the wildlife of the AONB's streams, rivers and wet grasslands. Increased demand in future will create pressure for new reservoirs within the AONB.

Manage your land for wildlife and maintain the rural nature of your property

Fields, woodland, paddocks and gardens support valuable and threatened wildlife. Inappropriate materials and features, often associated with urban areas, are leading to the gradual loss of the AONB's valued rural feel.

Respect other users – follow the Countryside Code

Through responsible behaviour we can all use and enjoy the countryside without damaging the enjoyment or livelihoods of others.

Slow down for people, horses and wildlife

Traffic spoils enjoyment of the High Weald for 80% of its residents. Speeding cars kill people, horses, badgers, deer and foxes – and ancient routeways and their rare plants are damaged by inconsiderate driving and parking.

Avoid using the car where possible and consider using renewable energy in your home

Emissions from petrol and other non-renewable fossil fuels contribute to climate change – and lead to degradation of valuable habitats such as sandrock and gradual loss of wildlife such as bluebells.

Take pride in the High Weald – promote its special features and places to family, friends and visitors

Promoting what you find special about the High Weald is the best way of encouraging commitment and action by others to the area.

Have a say

Your views can influence care of the area – use consultation processes operating at parish, district, county and AONB level to steer policy and action that affects the area.

Get involved – support local conservation organisations

With your financial and practical support, local conservation organisations can take action to care for the area – such as monitoring threatened wildlife, undertaking practical conservation tasks and lobbying Government.

Caring for the High Weald AONB

Cared for

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Residents, visitors and businesses can all contribute



Working together to care for a one of England's Finest Landscapes



"Belt upon belt, the wooded, dim, blue goodness..." Rudyard Kipling

The High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

One of England's Finest Landscapes



Exploring the High Weald AONB

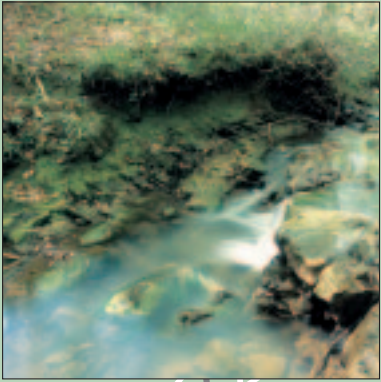
The High Weald is one of England’s Finest Landscapes – a historic countryside with a surprise around each corner. Rolling hills give ever-changing views as you move from ridge-top to secluded valley; through shady woods and fields of grazing animals – passing isolated farms and cottages along the way. Follow a sunken lane and you will be treading in the steps of Saxon drovers and their pigs!

A closer look reveals flower-rich meadows, colourful patches of heathland, impressive sandstone outcrops, secret streams in their steep, wooded ravines and ‘hammer’ ponds – remnants of the Wealden iron industry. This intimate, diverse landscape supports a wide variety of wildlife.

Sandstone and water

Bands of sandstone give the High Weald its high ridges, running east-west. Fast-flowing streams have carved out steep-sided ravines called gills in the sides of these ridges.

Harder areas of sandstone have formed the famous sandrock outcrops of the High Weald. The porous, moisture-holding sandrock and sheltered, damp gills provide ideal living conditions for ferns, mosses, liverworts and lichens. Many of these species are more characteristic of the mild and humid oceanic climate of Wales and Cornwall than that of the South East. Most famous is the tiny – and extremely rare – Tunbridge Filmy-fern.



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Weald Forest Ridge

Amongst the lofty ridges of the 128 square mile (328 square kilometre) Weald Forest Ridge are the remains of four great medieval forests. They once covered 40% of the area and were used for hunting by royalty, whilst commoners had rights for timber, grazing and fuel. From 2009 to 2012 the area is the focus of the Weald Forest Ridge Landscape Partnership Scheme, a project which will enrich the area’s natural and cultural heritage, and enable people to enjoy and care for part of the High Weald landscape.

Culture

Many artists have tried to capture the essence of the High Weald landscape in their work. The most famous of these is J M W Turner, who relied heavily on the patronage of local character Squire John ‘Mad Jack’ Fuller.

The High Weald has been the home – and inspiration – for some of England’s finest writers. Rudyard Kipling lived at Bateman’s and the hills and woods around Burwash provided the setting for many of his Sussex poems and stories, such as **Puck of Pook’s Hill**.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle lived near Crowborough. Some of his later works such as **The Poison Belt** (set in Rotherfield) and **The Return of Sherlock Holmes** included descriptions of the High Weald landscape and explorations by bicycle. Nearby Ashdown Forest is the setting for AA Milne’s **Winnie the Pooh** books.



Ancient woodland

Trees and woodland cover over one third of this distinctive landscape – with its pattern of wooded gills, small woods and copses separating the fields.

A stunning 72% of the High Weald’s woodland is classed as ancient – having existed continuously since 1600AD. These woodlands support many rare species and contain a wealth of archaeological features – for example the remains of iron workings.

High Weald woodlands have been managed for centuries by skilled workers. Although heavily exploited, they were rarely destroyed – being managed under a rotational coppice system. This ensured that a renewable supply of wood was always available, especially for fuel and building materials.



Grassland

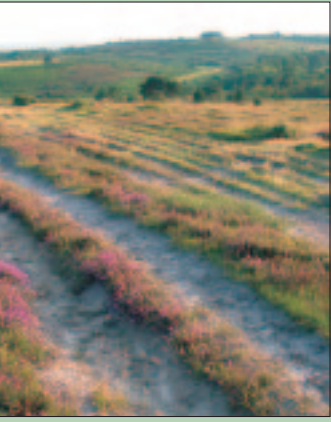
Irregular field patterns – little changed since medieval times – are a special feature of the High Weald. The small fields are edged with ancient boundaries and wood banks and often contain flower-rich grassland, buzzing with wildlife.

Nationally, around 95% of our wildflower meadows have been lost to intensive agriculture. However, with their heavy clay soils and steep slopes, many High Weald fields have never been ploughed up to grow crops: the AONB still has a relatively large number of ancient, undisturbed, wildflower-rich hay meadows and pastures. These unimproved grasslands are some of our most important habitats for wildlife conservation, supporting up to 100 kinds of grasses and wildflowers – which, in turn, support a great variety of insects and other creatures.

Heathland

Colourful areas of heath – with patches of purple heather and yellow gorse – are found on the high, sandy ridges. In much of England, heaths have disappeared, but the High Weald area is an important stronghold for this dramatic type of landscape.

At the heart of the High Weald, Ashdown Forest is the largest and best-preserved area of heathland in the



South East. Once the hunting playground of kings; today it is an area of open access where you can wander freely.

Heaths support rare and unusual wildlife species with their special conditions. Examples include the Dartford Warbler and Silver-studded Blue Butterfly.

Routeways

The High Weald has a unique, radiating network of routeways – created by early farmers driving their pigs into the woodland for fattening on acorns each autumn. In 1086 – when the practice was already past its peak – Domesday records indicate that around 150,000 pigs would have been driven to and from the woods of the High and Low Weald!

You can still follow these historic pig droving routes today – preserved as footpaths, bridleways and lanes. They are often deeply sunken from many centuries of use.

In spring and summer, the High Weald’s narrow, sunken lanes with their ancient, wooded banks are transformed into ‘tree tunnels’ – lined with wildflower-rich grassy verges.

Settlement

The pig pastures of the High Weald – used by farmers from the Downs and coastal plains – were known as dens. Over time, these became small, isolated farmsteads and today, the area still has many place names ending in “den”. Most dens have remained small – but a few have expanded to become larger settlements. Tenterden, for example, means “The den of the men of Thanet”.

Unlike the large, agricultural villages in much of England, High Weald villages arrived on the scene relatively late – not until Medieval times. Many sprang up around trading points on the high, dry ridge top routes – vantage points from which everyone can today enjoy views across this distinctive landscape.



Buildings

The traditional building materials and building styles of the High Weald are an essential part of the landscape’s distinctive character. The building materials have come, in fact, from that very landscape – so it is hardly surprising that they blend in so well. Links with the area’s wooded past are evident in the number of timber-framed and weather-boarded buildings, whilst the widespread use of sandstone, bricks and tiles is testimony to the High Weald’s underlying geology of sandstone and clay.

The High Weald has a particularly rich heritage of distinctive farm buildings – for example small barns and oasts (once used for drying hops). These buildings add character both to farms and to the landscape – and hold memories of agricultural times and traditions long passed.



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Outdoors

The diverse landscape of the High Weald offers many excellent opportunities for outdoor activities. Our rich heritage of routeways provides walking for all abilities. Promoted paths – those with guides and special waymarking – offer short walks from train stations, villages and pubs. For the really adventurous, several long distance walks cross the area: the High Weald Landscape Trail, Weald Way and 1066 Walk – to name but three. Countryside sites – such as Hastings and Buchan Country Parks and Ashdown Forest – allow you to wander at will.

For cyclists and riders, the Forest Way and Cuckoo Trail – both closed railway lines – provide short, easy and relaxed rides; whilst there are off-road cycling and riding routes around Bedgebury Pinetum and Bewl Water.

Some of the High Weald’s characteristic features also lend themselves to outdoor recreation: rock climbing on its unique sandstone outcrops; fishing in its many rivers and ponds and water sports and bird watching on its reservoirs – Bewl, Weir Wood and Ardingly.



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Matt Pitts

This map is to be used as a guide only. It is not an accurate representation.

Details of HighWeald attractions at www.highweald.org – along with information on local walk and cycle routes and places to stay

