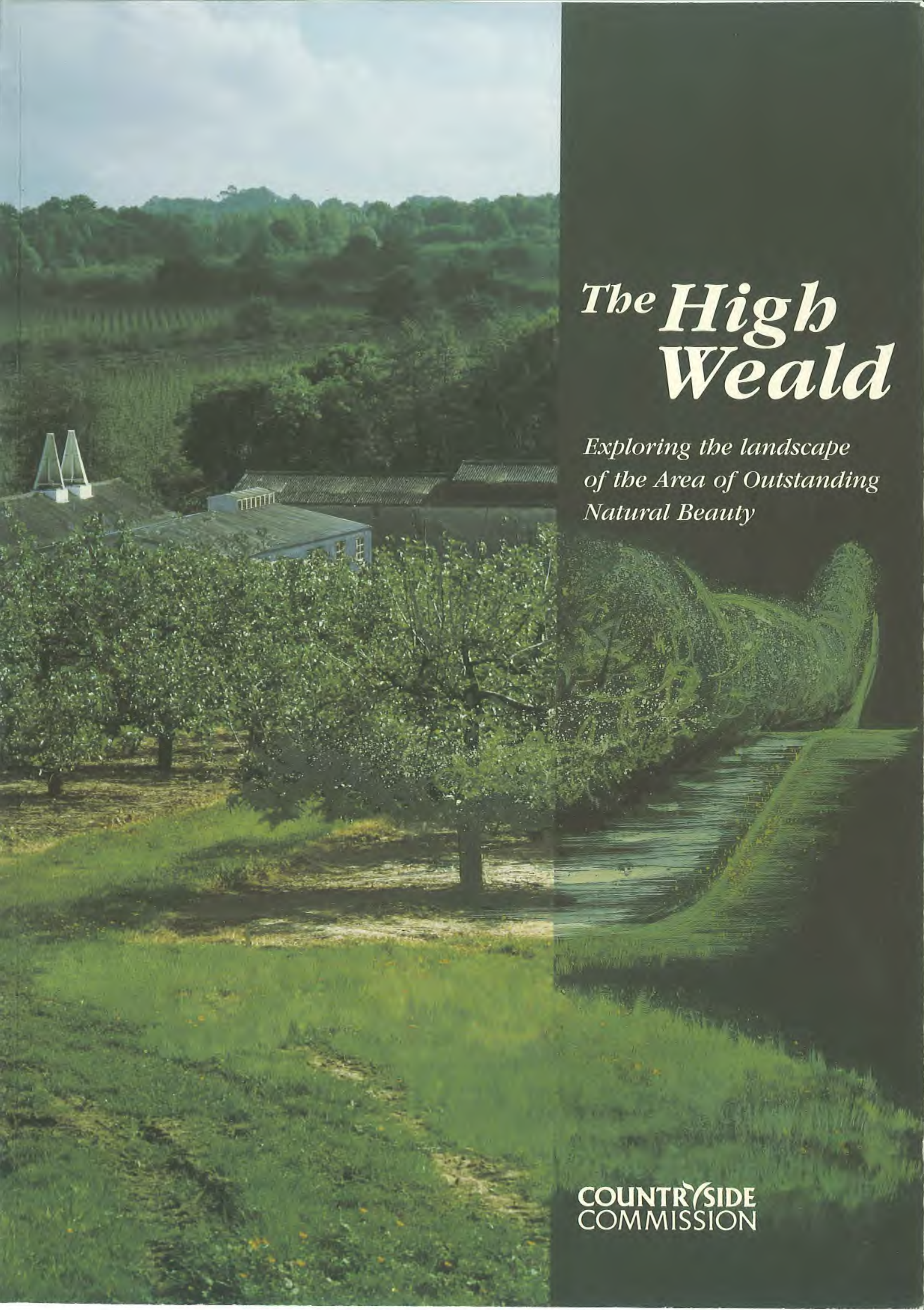

The High Weald

Exploring the landscape of the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

COUNTRYSIDE COMMISSION

The High Weald

Exploring the landscape of the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

A collaboration between
The Countryside Commission
East Sussex County Council
Kent County Council
Surrey County Council
West Sussex County Council

COUNTRYSIDE
COMMISSION

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Foreword

As one of the 40 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) in England and Wales, the High Weald is recognised as a landscape of national importance, in need of particular care to protect and manage it for the future.
The High Weald landscape has a consistant character and charm which distinguish it amongst the varied landscapes of lowland England. As an AONB it embodies the key qualities of being an identifiable and distinctive rural area which has remained largely unspoilt. AONBs are fundamentally working landscapes but they also serve a valuable function in today's busy society, as areas for retreat and relaxation. Through careful planning and land management and a sense of guardianship by all who use it, we hope that we can safeguard this unique area for this and future generations, as part of our vision for a sustainable countryside.

This publication is the 20th in the Countryside Commission's series of AONB landscape assessments. Our intention in publishing this report is to raise awareness of this beautiful landscape. We have chosen to produce it in a new, more visual format in order to communicate the complexity and intricate character of the High Weald. We hope it will be of interest to those who live and work in the area, as well as to visitors and the wide range of agencies, groups and individuals involved in planning and land management in the AONB. It is in the hands of this audience that the future well-being of the landscape rests.

John Johnson

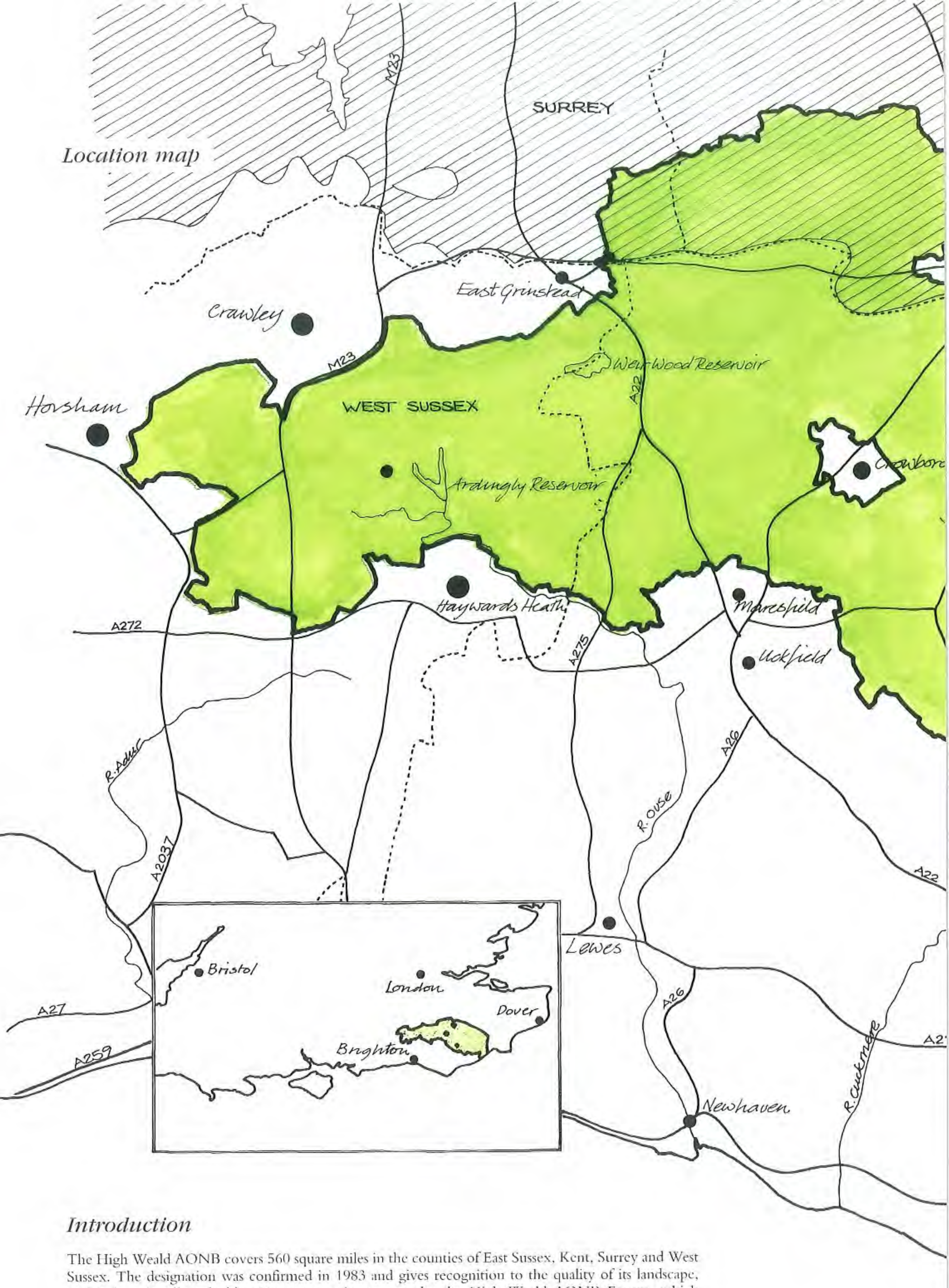
SIR JOHN JOHNSON
Chairman
Countryside Commission

Preface

This document is the result of a landscape assessment of the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. In addition to raising public awareness of the High Weald, it aims to establish the essential components of the landscape, which produce the particular quality and character for which the AONB is valued. The document also examines the changes occurring in the landscape and the pressures which threaten it.
The assessment was undertaken through collaboration between the four counties of East Sussex, Kent, Surrey and West Sussex and the Countryside Commission and forms part of a series of landscape assessments being carried out by each county individually. The assessment has been based on the Guidelines issued by the Countryside Commission and draws on work done by the counties. It forms the appraisal of the existing condition of the High Weald which provides the basis for the preparation of the management plan, enabling policies to be devised which allow positive change whilst retaining the essential character of this beautiful area.
By dividing the High Weald into character areas, based on visual and perceptive units of landscape, the document aims to give greater emphasis to the importance of locality and the 'sense of place' possessed by an area.

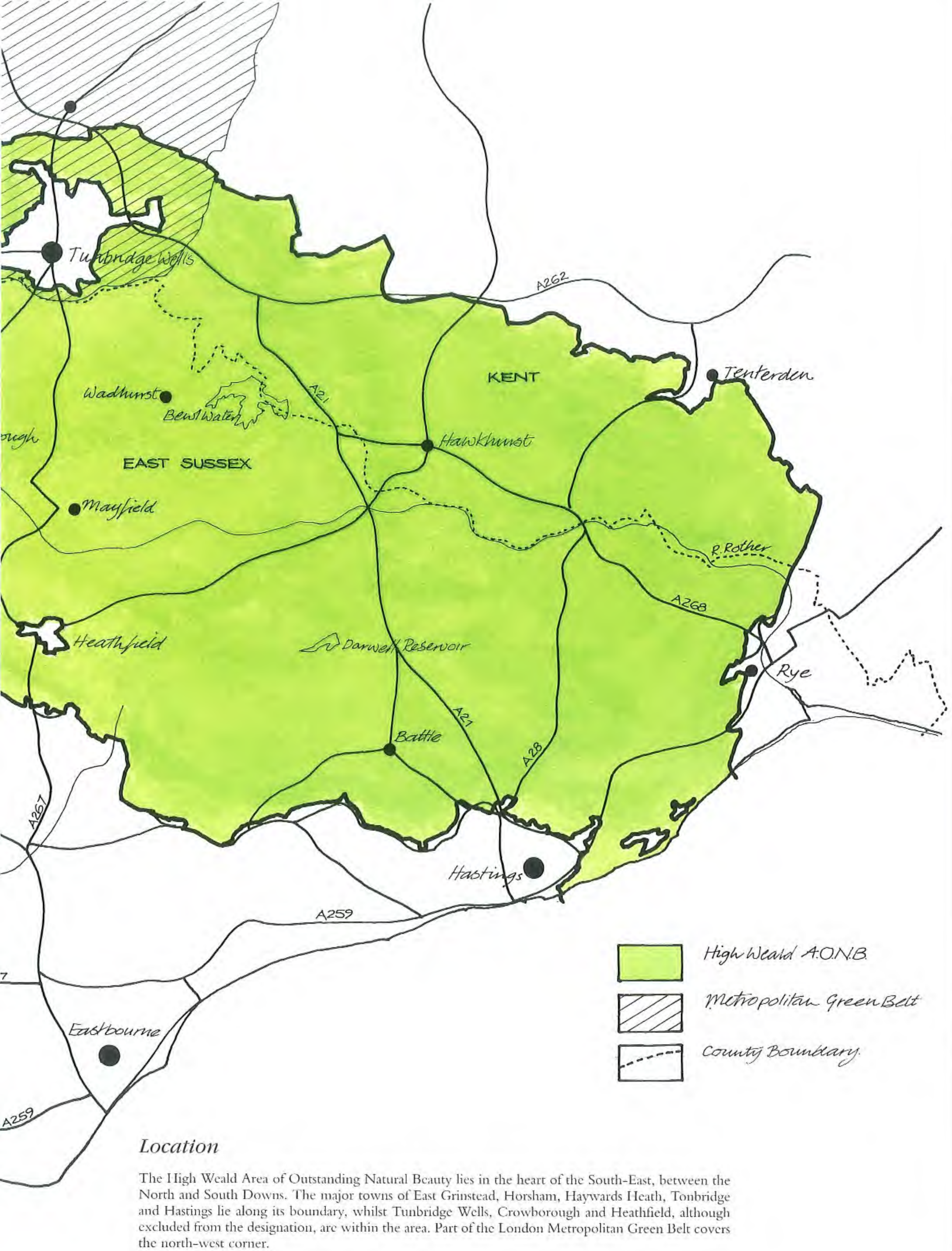
Rebecca Warren
High Weald AONB Landscape Assessment Team
November 1994

Location map



Introduction

The High Weald AONB covers 560 square miles in the counties of East Sussex, Kent, Surrey and West Sussex. The designation was confirmed in 1983 and gives recognition to the quality of its landscape, which is nationally valuable. Management is overseen by the High Weald AONB Forum, which includes representatives of the four counties, eleven districts and a wide range of amenity and other interest groups.



Location

The High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty lies in the heart of the South-East, between the North and South Downs. The major towns of East Grinstead, Horsham, Haywards Heath, Tonbridge and Hastings lie along its boundary, whilst Tunbridge Wells, Crowborough and Heathfield, although excluded from the designation, are within the area. Part of the London Metropolitan Green Belt covers the north-west corner.

High Weald Words

Ancient woodland

Woodland which has been continuously wooded since at least AD1600, but may have been felled and replanted or had additional planting since that time.

Ancient semi-natural woodland

Woodland which has been continuously wooded since at least AD1600.

Ghyll

A steep-sided, narrow stream valley.

Shaw

A strip of deciduous woodland, usually 30 - 40 feet wide, between fields or along roadsides. In West Sussex this is called a 'rewe'.

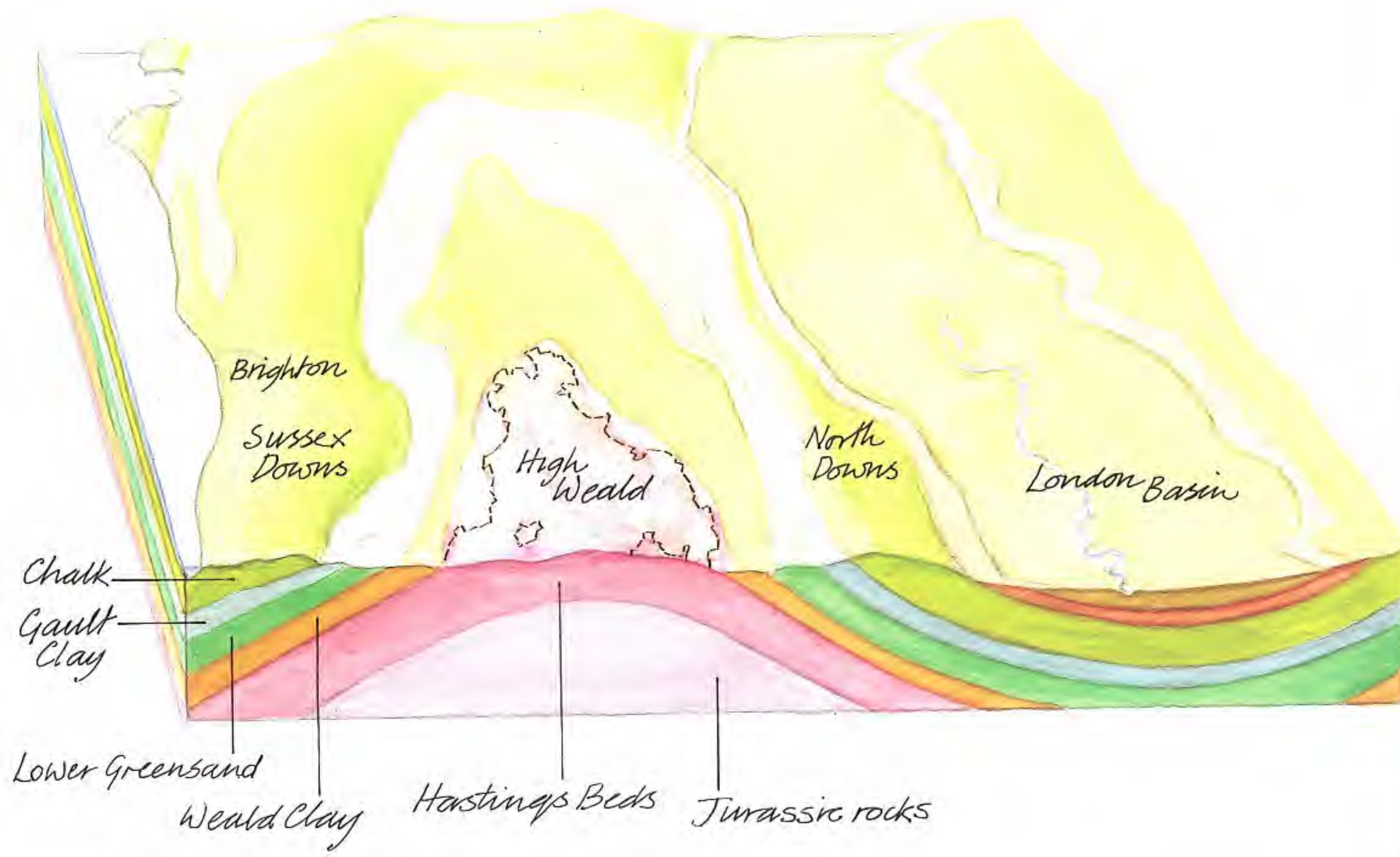
Coppicing

A woodland management technique, where trees are cut down to the stump, or stool, every 3 - 40 years, producing a crop of poles. After each cutting, the stump sends up several new shoots, which become the next crop.

Place names

--den	Denotes a pasture, used by farmers living outside the Weald, for grazing pigs over the summer.
--sell	Denotes a group of animal shelters or herdsmen's huts, eg Houndsell
--hamm	Land in a river bend
--leah	Woodland clearing
--eye	Island, eg Oxney

Geology



Landscape is a combination of many elements. It is rock, soil and vegetation and the dramatic influences of time and weather, man and other living creatures upon them.

The South East of England has an underlying geological symmetry which has produced a distinctive and fascinating landscape. Within this region, the High Weald has developed on one particular geological outcrop, the Hastings Beds, which provides the foundation for the character of its landscape.

One hundred and forty million years ago what is now the South East was swamp and freshwater lake. Over the next forty million years, clays, silts and sands were continually deposited over this swamp, after which the sea flooded across the area, gradually covering it in the sediment which formed what we know as the Greensands, Gault Clay and Chalk. Sixty-five million years ago, at the end of this Cretaceous period, the region began to rise. As the central portion of the area was lifted highest, its cover was eroded, gradually cutting through the Chalk, Gault Clay, Greensands and Weald Clay, exposing the underlying sandstones and clays, known as the Hastings beds. This area became the High Weald.

The sandstones and clays, which form these Hastings beds, have had a profound influence on the development of the region. Some sandstones, such as the Ashdown beds, have withstood erosion better than others, resulting in the high ground and poor soils of Ashdown Forest. Elsewhere, different rates of erosion of different beds of rock have produced the typical ridges and steep ghylls which characterise this area.

It is the Hastings beds, especially the Wadhurst clays, which contain the ore which supplied the Wealden iron industry until the nineteenth century, whilst the sandstones and clays not only provided the building materials used so frequently in the AONB, but also grew the great oaks for which the Weald was famous.

Andredsweald - the history of the High Weald

The history of the Weald is bound up with, and shaped by, the woodland from which it takes its name. The Romans called it *Silva Anderida* and the Anglo-Saxons knew it as *Andredsleah* or *Andredsweald* - the Forest of Anderida (Pevensey). Certainly whilst other areas of England were being cleared and settled throughout the Neolithic, Roman and Anglo-Saxon periods, the Weald remained a vast expanse of untamed, almost inaccessible woodland.

In prehistory small groups of hunter-gatherers roamed the woodlands and by Roman times there was a small but thriving iron industry, which virtually died out after Roman influence collapsed in Britain, around 400AD. Over the next 600 years the High Weald woodlands were sporadically used for summer grazing, mainly by coastal landowners. By the tenth century, small-scale woodland clearance was gradually occurring across the Weald and the temporary huts beside the summer pastures began to develop into permanent settlements.

Nevertheless the interior, or High Weald, remained one of the least settled and most densely wooded areas in Britain in the eleventh century. The steep topography and cold, sticky soils made farming both difficult and barely profitable, whilst the thick, heavy mud made travelling almost impossible for most of the year. In fact, agriculture in much of the High Weald was almost subsistence farming until the nineteenth century, when field drainage and better fertilisers were developed. Instead, such prosperity as there was in the High Weald came from the cloth-weaving industry, smuggling and the iron industry, which utilised the abundant ore, timber and water to supply the country with iron and cannons until the eighteenth century. It was not until the late nineteenth century that fruit growing became a significant part of the economy, by which time the area was becoming popular as much for its situation as its produce.

Although the forests of the High Weald have been substantially cleared and intensively harvested over the centuries, the area still retains a very high proportion of woodland compared to the rest of the country, thus retaining its cultural and visual links with the historical Andredsweald.

Norman Browne

Ancient woodland

Much of the woodland in the High Weald is classified as *ancient* or *ancient semi-natural woodland*. The retention of such woodland in this area has resulted from a combination of factors. Many fields were once simply cut out of the woodland, leaving thick strips or *shaws* around the edges, some of which still exist today. Some woods clothe the sides of *ghylls* or valleys, which were too steep to be cleared for cultivation. In addition the demand for charcoal imposed by the iron industry led to woodlands having a high

woodlands having a high value in their own right.

Ancient woodlands are very important wildlife habitats. They usually contain a wide range of plants specifically adapted for shady conditions, many of which may be slow, or unlikely, to colonise new woodlands. The tradition of coppicing these woods has encouraged the diversity of plants, and therefore of birds and animals which depend on them, so that the woods of the High Weald are a unique and important part of the heritage of the AONB.

Sally Marsh

H471 BCD

Agriculture in the High Weald

Ever since the Anglo-Saxons drove their swine into the woods of the High Weald for summer grazing, this area has been dominated by pasture and stock rearing. The heavy, wet clays and steep, awkward topography of the region made cultivation difficult, so that for much of its history, the High Weald concentrated on sheep and cattle. Only sufficient crops for its own use, especially oats, were grown. In the seventeenth century hops began to be widely used to flavour ale and hop growing quickly became established, producing not just for the local market but also for London. Fruit production first appeared during the seventeenth century, but it was not until the end of the nineteenth century that it became widely established. Indeed the acreage devoted to its cultivation doubled between 1870 and 1914.

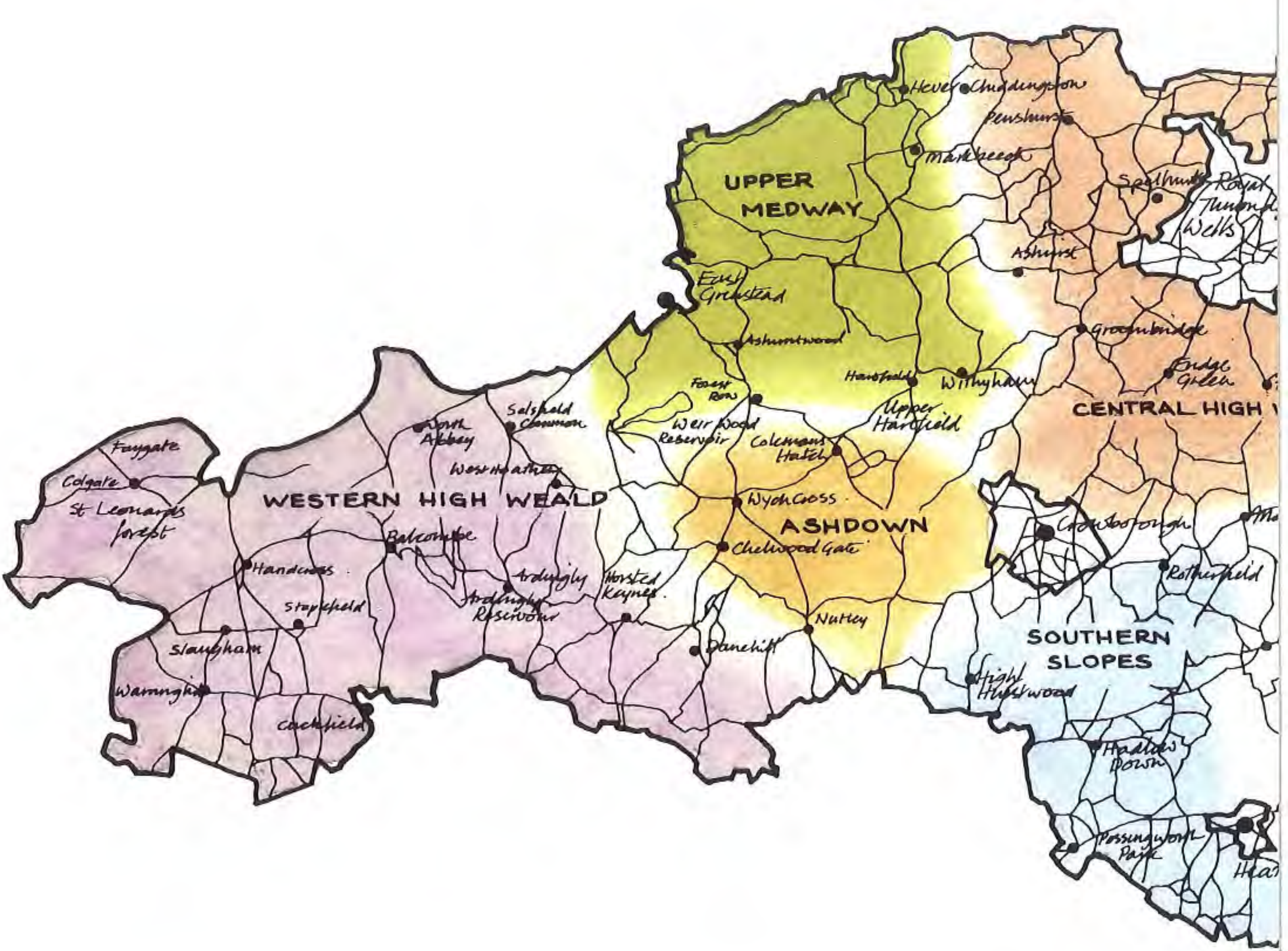
Today the historical bias towards sheep and cattle in the High Weald remains. Out of 105 000 hectares in agricultural land-use, there are 59 000 ha of permanent pasture (over five years old) and only 28 000 ha of crops. Nevertheless major changes are currently taking place within European farming, which affect the situation in the High Weald. The majority of farmland in the AONB is classified as Grade 3 and is not therefore very productive. As farm subsidies and farm incomes are reduced, it is these marginal areas which are most vulnerable to financial pressures. Since the designation of the AONB in 1983, the number of full-time farms has decreased from 1027 in 1982 to 870 in 1992. 65% of farms in the High Weald are now part-time and there has been a 12% reduction in the agricultural workforce. These trends have certain implications for the landscape of the AONB : -

1. Traditional farms are diversifying:
Loss of hop gardens and orchards is changing the traditional gardenesque appearance of parts of the AONB, especially in Kent, whilst colourful crops such as linseed and oilseed rape are becoming more prevalent. Set-Aside options, for leaving land uncultivated over a number of years, are also becoming popular. Although this gives a neglected appearance to the land, it can provide opportunities for new wildlife habitats or new land-uses, such as short-rotation woodland. Many farms are also diversifying out of agricultural production to alternative enterprises such as tourism or leisure activities.

2. Farms are giving up commercial agriculture:
Where farms are unable to survive in the agricultural market, many are sold on to non-farming land-owners who require grazing or amenity land. This can result in substantial changes in land management, which may affect the appearance of the landscape. Such changes may range from the erection of new fences to piecemeal development.

As agriculture in the High Weald comes under increasing pressure it is possible that the landscape of the AONB could alter considerably, as the requirements placed upon it reflect the changes both in agriculture and society.

Sally Marsh



How to use this document

Landscape is not just a combination of the physical components of the countryside. It is a living, dynamic environment, created by its own history and above all by the people who live and work there, continuing the process of shaping and defining their locality.

In this document, the High Weald AONB divides into nine *character areas*. Each one describes an area of the AONB which has both a strong visual cohesiveness and a sense of place, produced not just by the similarity of the landscape but also by the social identity of the individual areas. *Character areas* do not have hard edges - there are no fixed lines in the landscape - but merge from one into another.

The AONB is in a constant state of development and evolution. Within the *character areas*, the most noticeable pressures and changes have been identified. Many of these also occur elsewhere, often across the entire AONB.

Within each *character area*, several *local character areas* have been identified, where features of local landscape significance or specific issues are dominant. These *local character areas* are illustrated in the last pages of each *character area* section.

Western High Weald

Landscape description

This is the western end of the AONB, extending from Horsham to Ashdown Forest. It includes St Leonards, Tilgate and Worth Forests in the north, the Upper Ouse valley in the south and the small ridges and valleys between Turners Hill and Haywards Heath.

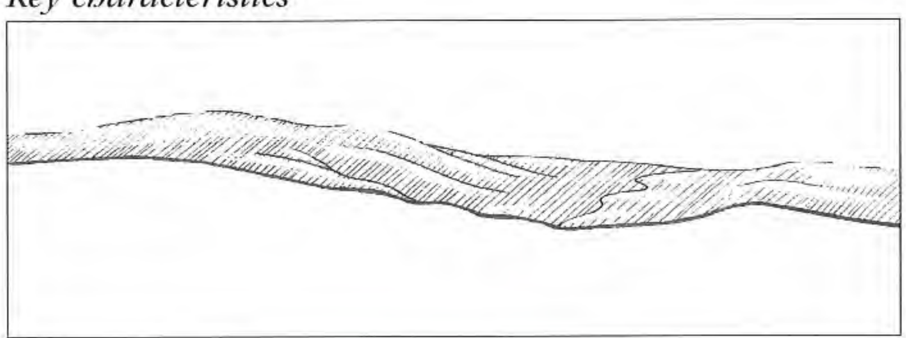
This is an area of contrasting landscapes. In the north, the sandstone Forest Ridge forms a thickly wooded spine, concealing this end of the AONB from the busy towns of Horsham, Crawley and Gatwick. There have been heathy forests on this ridge since mediaeval times.

Although large areas were gradually enclosed for farming, the exposure and poor quality of the badly-drained soils made them difficult to cultivate successfully, so that large tracts remained heathy scrub until after the Second World War. Much of this land was then acquired by the Forestry Commission in the 1950s and planted up with commercial conifers.

Historic ridgeway tracks and ancient drove-roads, running south from London or north from the coast to the forest swine-pastures, encouraged small settlements along their routes, thus producing the characteristic ridgetop villages, such as Turners Hill. The coming of the railway, via Balcombe, in the 1840s and the improvements in roads, put this end of the High Weald under increasing pressure for more housing, resulting in a great deal of nineteenth and twentieth century development scattered through the forests and along country lanes.

In contrast to the forest ridge, much of the rest of this area retains a strong network of shaws and pockets of ancient woodland. Gorse, pine and beech occur frequently along the roadsides on the more acid soils

Key characteristics



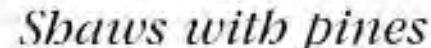
Landform

This area is dominated by the forest ridge in the north, which is itself broken up into a series of smaller ridges and valleys. On the northern and western fringes of this ridge, the land flattens out as the sandstones of the High Weald run into the clays of the Low Weald. Elsewhere there is a network of intimate ghylls and ridges, through which the smooth-sided valley of the River Ouse runs eastwards.

◀

Shaws with pines

Thick shaws, along roadsides and around field edges, are a common feature across most of the AONB, but in the Western High Weald these are distinguished by the abundance of Scot's pine and holly within them. This is particularly noticeable around Slaugham and Warninglid. ▶

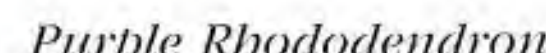


Purple Rhododendron

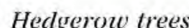
The vigorous purple rhododendron, *Rhododendron ponticum*, first made its escape from local gardens into the Sussex countryside, in the nineteenth century.

It has become so well established that in places such as between Handcross and Turners Hill, it lines the roadsides, giving a formal, park-like feel and a vivid splash of purple blossom in early summer.

◀



near Ashdown Forest, and the predominantly timber-framed houses of the west become increasingly interspersed with houses built in the local golden sandstone. In the upper Ouse valley, the woodland is more fragmented and the fields are often larger than those in the east. In this more open landscape, hedgerow trees become a dominant visual feature, as they do across the flat fields around Lower Beeding. South of the Ouse, the sandstones of the High Weald end in a final flourish of tiny ridges and deep, wooded ghylls, concealing a network of small lanes, peppered with large houses and extensive gardens.



Hedgerow trees

Where the traditional pattern of thick shaws between fields does not exist, it is typical to find narrow hedgerows regularly punctuated by mature oak, or sometimes ash, trees.

In some areas the hedgerows themselves have been lost and these great, spreading trees may be all that remain to indicate the old field boundaries, isolated in a sweep of grass or corn.

Sandstone outcrops

The soft nature of the underlying sandstone in this area has allowed considerable erosion to occur, especially where tracks or streams have worn deep into the ground over the centuries.

This has resulted in the frequent exposure of sandstone outcrops, varying in colour from pale yellow to dark brown and often netted over by a thick web of tree roots.

Valerie Alford

Sally Marsh

Large tracts of dense woodland.

Most of the woodlands which dominate the northern sandstone ridge are commercial conifer plantations, interspersed with sweeps of birch or beech woodland. These woods form a dense, dark belt of trees, which confine views and displace farmland as the major land-use in the north.

Special Features

Architecture

Houses in this area were traditionally timber-framed over which may be a skin of locally made tiles or brick, for protection against the weather. Timber-framed barns had a cheaper covering of black weatherboard less commonly used on houses.

On the Forest Ridge sandstone was often used, although frequently in combination with other materials, as it was more expensive. The most distinctive traditional roofing material of this area, unknown in the rest of the High Weald, is Horsham stone, a local grey sandstone. Lasting for up to 150 years before needing renovation, the great stone slabs quickly acquire a rich and beautiful patina of mosses and lichens. Nowadays, however, these roofs are not being replaced, as Horsham stone is no longer quarried.

Rebecca Warren

South of England Show.

The South of England Agricultural show takes place at Ardingly every June. The show offers a microcosm of Wealden employment and activity. Whilst rows of Friesian cattle and the latest technology in tractors emphasise the importance of commercial agriculture in the locality, there is also considerable enthusiasm for the 'rare breeds' of farm animals, where spotted Jacobs sheep compete for attention with Dorking chickens.

In the refreshment tents, local dairies offer fried Sussex goats cheese or sheeps-milk icecream, whilst local vineyards tempt passers-by with glasses of English wine. This range of farm enterprise is indicative of the recent diversification within the farming communities of the High Weald.

In the showrings, top-class horses and riders go through their paces, interspersed with the excited whoops of the local Pony Clubs. Horse ownership is widespread in the AONB, especially where farms are no longer agriculturally viable. Beyond the showrings, enormous tractors and combine harvestors remind visitors of the scale of modern agriculture, whilst nearby, traditional countryside craftsmen lay hedges, make wattle fences and carve elegant bowls out of local wood.

The show is one of the main opportunities for the rural communities of the High Weald to reach a wider audience and illustrates the range of activities going on in the High Weald, both by those whose livelihood is tied up in the land and by those who live there but work elsewhere.

Pressures and change

The strip of countryside next to the road is the most commonly seen part of the AONB, indeed for many people it is the only part they ever see, and yet it is also the most at risk from degradation.

Urban edge development

The western end of the High Weald is under extreme pressure from urban-edge developments, such as garden centres, golf-courses, sporadic housing estates. The damage to the AONB occurs in three ways:-

1. Through the 'urban' nature of the development itself;
2. Through the use of inappropriate materials;
3. Through insensitive signing.

It is the insidious, cumulative effect of such piecemeal development, which changes and urbanises the whole appearance of the countryside. ▶

Typical Urban Edge Developments

These include ...

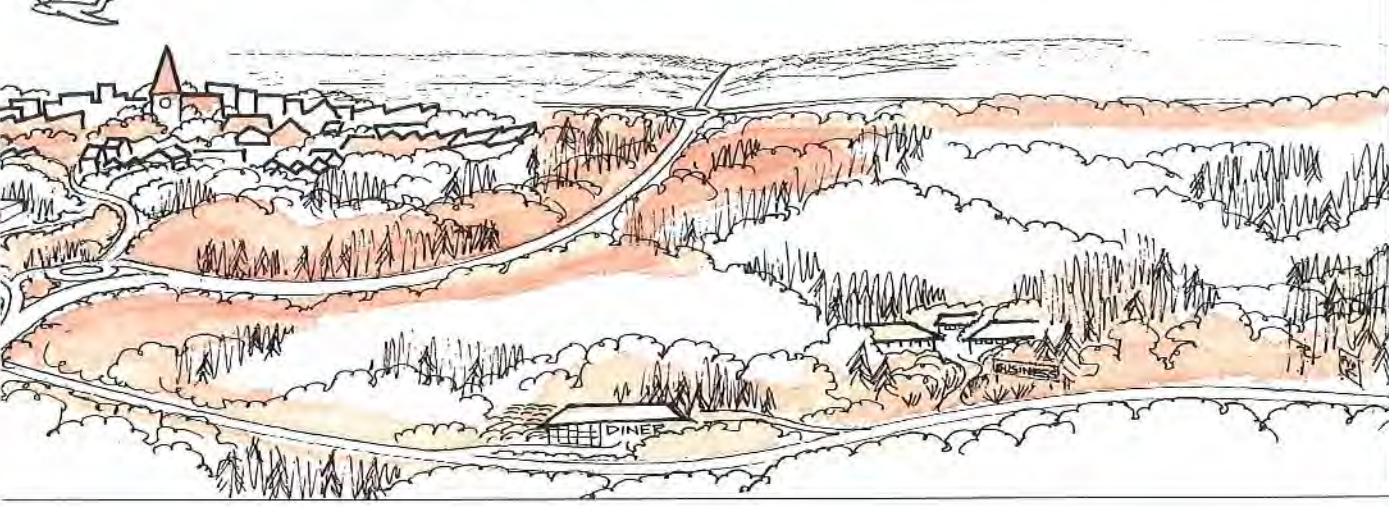
Ribbon development
Pick Your Own farms
Farm parks
Petrol stations
Golf courses
Builders yards
Garden centres
Cafes
Aquatics shops
Car sales
Farm shops
Tea rooms
Football grounds
Superstores

The populations of towns such as Horsham and Crawley impose pressure on the most easily accessible areas.

This can contribute to farming no longer being a viable land-use, leading to apparently neglected land, and pressure for other types of land-use.

Inappropriate land-uses and poor design, using alien materials, erodes local character and beauty.

Each new development, however small, changes the appearance, and hence people's perception, of the AONB.



Rebecca Warren

Development

Materials

Signing

Road Pressure

The high numbers of commuters living in this area leads to severe pressure on even the smallest roads, many of which are used as 'rat runs'. This pressure often results in 'road improvements', which range from complete re-routing, such as the A23 at Handcross, to small changes in appearance. Again, it is the cumulative effect which causes the damage. Each time a concrete kerb or white lines appear in a small lane, or a simple junction suddenly sprouts a mini-roundabout, the very quality of 'natural' beauty, for which we value the countryside, is pushed further away.

Where new roads are built, they often ignore local style and materials or employ standard designs for items such as fences, without considering the intrusion on their surroundings. The design of new roads and road improvements needs to take the character of the local area into account, and to reflect its individuality.

Rhododendron invasion

Invasion of both commercial and private woodlands in the High Weald by rhododendron and laurel is a continual problem. Originally planted for game cover or in gardens, these shrubs quickly established themselves in the wild, thriving on the well-drained, acid soils of the Forest Ridge and similar areas. Rhododendron tolerates shady woodland conditions, spreading extensively. It is too widely established to eradicate from the AONB, besides giving a particular quality to some areas, but needs to be contained to prevent it from choking and shading out native plants.

Other pressures

Suburbanisation (page 22)
Diversification

Rebecca Warren

Western High Weald

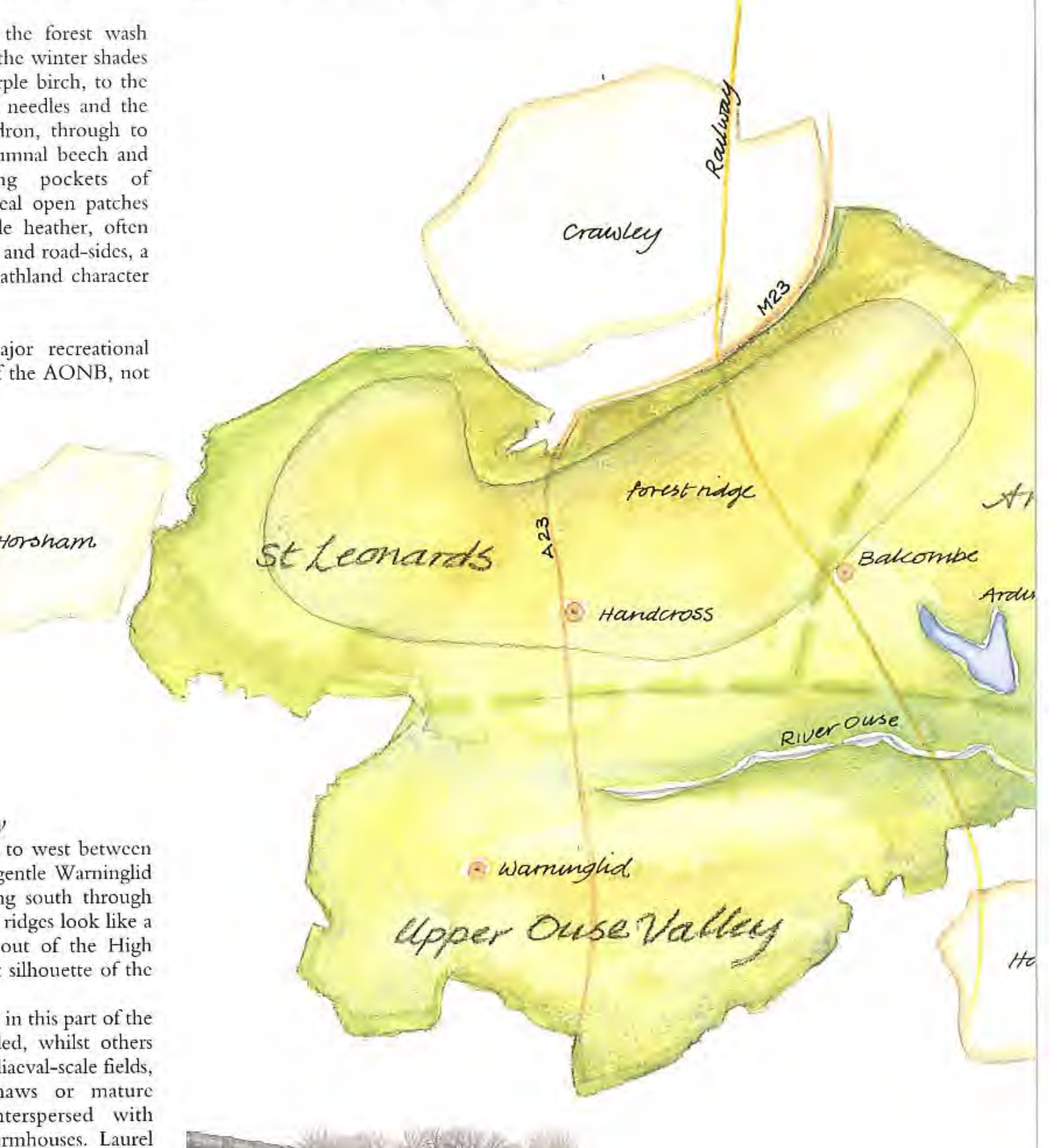
St Leonards

The extensive forests of this area give a special quality to this part of the AONB. It is one of those rare places in the South-east where it is still possible to lose oneself with comparative ease. The dense tracts of woodland impose a sense of isolation in the landscape and the roads and paths which cut through them are often bounded by tall stands of conifers, limiting views out.

The changing colours of the forest wash across this landscape, from the winter shades of dark green pine and purple birch, to the spring green of new larch needles and the vivid mauve of rhododendron, through to the golden splashes of autumnal beech and chestnut. The remaining pockets of broadleaved woodland reveal open patches of yellow gorse and purple heather, often straggling along hedgerows and road-sides, a reminder of the former heathland character of this landscape.

These woods form a major recreational resource at the west end of the AONB, not just for the opportunity to relax away from traffic and housing, but also for the stimulation of different sights, sounds and smells. A walk in these woodlands can pass through mature beech and oak forest, around hidden stretches of water where swans glide, and along streams cutting through layers of exposed sandstone, into dark plantations of pine, where the air is resin-scented and footsteps are deadened by a thick covering of pine-needles on the paths.

The mediaeval iron industry flourished in this area, where there were good supplies of iron ore and abundant timber to fuel the smelting. Many of the local streams were



The Upper Ouse Valley

The River Ouse runs east to west between the Forest Ridge and the gentle Warninglid to Cuckfield ridge. Driving south through this area on the A23, these ridges look like a series of waves, washing out of the High Weald, towards the distant silhouette of the South Downs.

Many of the steeper valleys in this part of the AONB are densely wooded, whilst others retain pockets of small mediaeval-scale fields, surrounded by thick shaws or mature hedgerow trees and interspersed with parkland and gentrified farmhouses. Laurel and beech hedges creep along many of the lanes here, halted only by ornamental gates, but there are numerous areas of new hedgerow trees or deciduous plantations.

North of Warninglid, the River Ouse follows a gentle, winding valley, where in the past, the better drained soils were more easily cultivated than on the Forest Ridge. The resulting intensity of use left little room for woodland. The hedgerow trees which remain here, therefore, have a particular value for the character of the area.

Balcombe Viaduct ▶

dammed, to provide a controlled flow of water to power the bellows or 'hammers' of the forges. Although the industry is long dead, the old hammer ponds, fringed now by dense woodlands, still lie hidden in their small valleys, the most visible remains of this once vibrant industry. In St Leonards Forest the long, sinuous lakes of Hawkins Pond and Hammer Pond are typical examples. Today they are an important recreational resource, valued especially by birdwatchers, fishermen and generations of pond-dipping school children.

The fields which jostle around the edges of the forests, are often large and open, their sparse hedges dotted with spreading oak trees. The agricultural nature of this landscape, however, is threatened by urban-edge developments, such as business parks and 'executive housing', springing up along the roadsides.

Former hammer pond ▶

Ardingly

The streams which drain off the sandstone ridge between Horsham and Ashdown Forest, have formed a maze of narrow ridges and thickly-wooded ghylls. Deceptively hidden amongst these intimate valleys, are the remains of a once prosperous, industrial landscape. Magnificent chains of hammer ponds stretch through the woodlands around Horsted Keynes and substantial timber-framed and sandstone farms nestle amongst the trees.

Although many of the roads run along ridges, the strong network of thick hedges, woodlands and shaws which clothe the slopes, often confines views to tantalising glimpses through field gates. Individual trees in the hedges are a prominent feature.

This area is particularly rich in ghyll woodlands, which fill almost every valley bottom. Most of these woods support a wide variety of flowers, insects and lichens and some are of national importance to nature conservation.

The combination of intimate landform and dense tree-cover, however, also conceals the major tourist attractions of Wakehurst Gardens, the South of England showground, the Bluebell Railway and Ardingly Reservoir. This increases the pressure on the small network of tiny lanes crossing the area, which are already heavily used by the large number of residents who commute out of the area to work.

◀ *Slaugham*

Parks and Gardens

The hills and vales of the AONB conceal a wealth of beautiful parks and gardens, set deep amongst lush fields and woodlands. Although land-owners had been developing their estates since mediaeval times, it was not until the late nineteenth century that the majority of the gardens open today were created. The coming of the turnpike roads, followed by the railways, opened up the High Weald to an influx of wealthy potential land-owners. These 'new gentry' were attracted by the underdeveloped countryside, lying within easy reach of London and its commerce. This influx co-incided with the discovery and importation of new, exotic plants from the expanding British Empire which resulted in the rise in popularity of gardening.

This outburst of horticultural enthusiasm a century ago has provided the High Weald with a range of important parks and gardens. Considerable modifications to existing grounds took place at this time, including the re-creation of the mediaeval gardens at Penshurst Place and Hever Castle and the alterations to Capability Brown's landscape at Sheffield Park. In addition, however, many new gardens were created, such as those at Gravetye Manor, developed by the champion of 'informal planting', William Robinson, whilst Edwin Lutyens designed what is now Christopher Lloyd's garden at Great Dixter. Other gardens, such as Nymans and Leonardslea, however, are best known for their important collections of rhododendrons, azaleas, camellias and other acid-tolerant plants, which fill the landscape with the vivid colours of their native Far East. Perhaps the most well-known, Wakehurst Place was taken over in the 1960s as an extension of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

The Great Storm of 1987 brought considerable destruction to many of the gardens and parks in the High Weald, especially those, such as Sheffield Park and Wakehurst, with valuable collections of old trees. This disaster, however, has enabled a new cycle of planting and design to revitalise the rich heritage of ornamental landscapes for future generations to enjoy.

▲ *Scotney Castle, owned by the National Trust*

◀ *Nymans Garden, owned by the National Trust*

Upper Medway

Landscape description

This area covers the gentle folds of the Upper Medway valley, from Weir Wood Reservoir in the west along the northern edge of Ashdown Forest to Chiddingstone and Groombridge in the east.

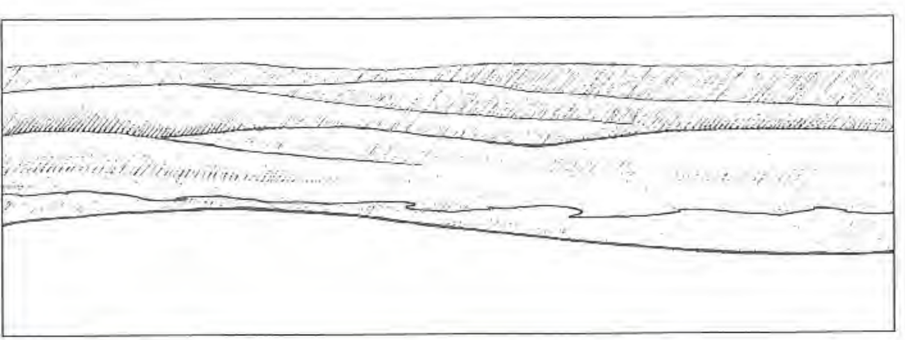
The gentle topography of these valleys and the flatter, rolling land to the north around Markbeech, made this area easier to farm than the steep sandstone ridges and valleys, which characterise other parts of the High Weald. This has resulted in a landscape of relatively little woodland, dominated by mixed agriculture, where the fields are frequently bounded by narrow hedges or post and wire fence and dotted with hedgerow trees. Only in the west, around Ashurst Wood and Forest Row, does the typical High Weald landscape of deep ghyll and ridge reassert itself, where small, less intensively grazed fields are hidden between larger woodlands.

This part of the AONB bears considerable evidence of the long history of man in the High Weald. West of Dormansland, the ancient hill-fort of Dry Hill offers magnificent views of the surrounding countryside, whilst the Roman highway from London to Lewes passes between Marsh Green and Holtye. The iron industry which flourished here can be traced from the redundant hammer ponds and substantial mediaeval houses built with the ensuing wealth, such as Gravetye Manor.

Key Characteristics

Landform

This area comprises a series of parallel ridges and valleys running east to west, whose watercourses combine to form the upper reaches of the River Medway. This river has a narrow floodplain, extending as far as Upper Hartfield. In the north, the gently rolling landscape gradually flattens out towards Hever Castle and the River Eden.



Hedgerow trees

Intensive farming has reduced many former shaws to narrow hedges, interspersed with mature trees. Along the upper valley slopes and on the flatter land in the north, most of these trees are oak or ash, but on the valley floors occasional groups of willows stand out, their bare, orange twigs seeming to burst into flame as they catch shafts of winter sunlight.

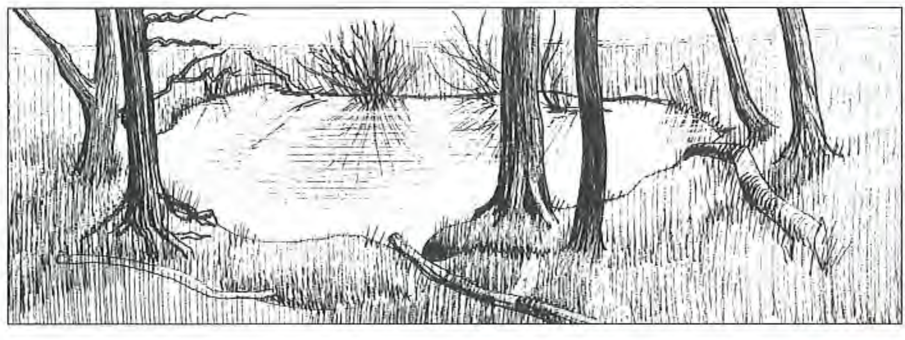
Roadside Coppice

Many of the fields are surrounded by dense deciduous shaws, almost all of which have been coppiced in the past. Today the thickets of thin poles support a lush canopy of leaves, shading out the sunlight from the woodland floor and stippling the roads with gently swaying shadows and pools of light.

Extensive cultivation of hops and fruit until the early part of this century, has left a legacy of occasional orchards and a variety of oast-houses. The proximity of East Grinstead and its railway station have encouraged people to move out into the neighbouring countryside, causing many farms to be split up and the outbuildings to be gentrified into houses. This has increased commuter traffic on the roads, whilst urban-edge land-uses, such as golf courses, steal out to the very edge of the AONB.

Ponds

This area is dotted with ponds. Between Cowden and Chiddingstone almost every field has a small, usually stagnant, pool lurking in the undergrowth around its margins. Many of these were dug to extract the underlying iron ore, whilst others yielded *marl* - a clay spread on the fields as a soil improver. Other ponds exist as strings of hammer ponds, such as those at Ladycross Farm near Dormansland, concealed in small, wooded valleys. ▶



Sally Marsh

Red-brick and tile houses.

Many of the buildings, from cottage to castle, are of local brick, often hung with red tiles. The warm orange bricks are frequently interspersed with blue-grey bricks, sometimes creating elaborate patterns. These different colours result from different positions in the kiln during the firing process, not from different types of brick. ▶

Strong, regular field pattern

The gentle topography of this area reveals a landscape with a strong patchwork of similar-sized fields and blocks of woodland. There are fewer shaws here than in many other parts of the High Weald and many of the arable fields, especially those in the north around Hever, are fringed only by trimmed hedges and hedgerow trees, allowing the strong field pattern to be seen. ▶

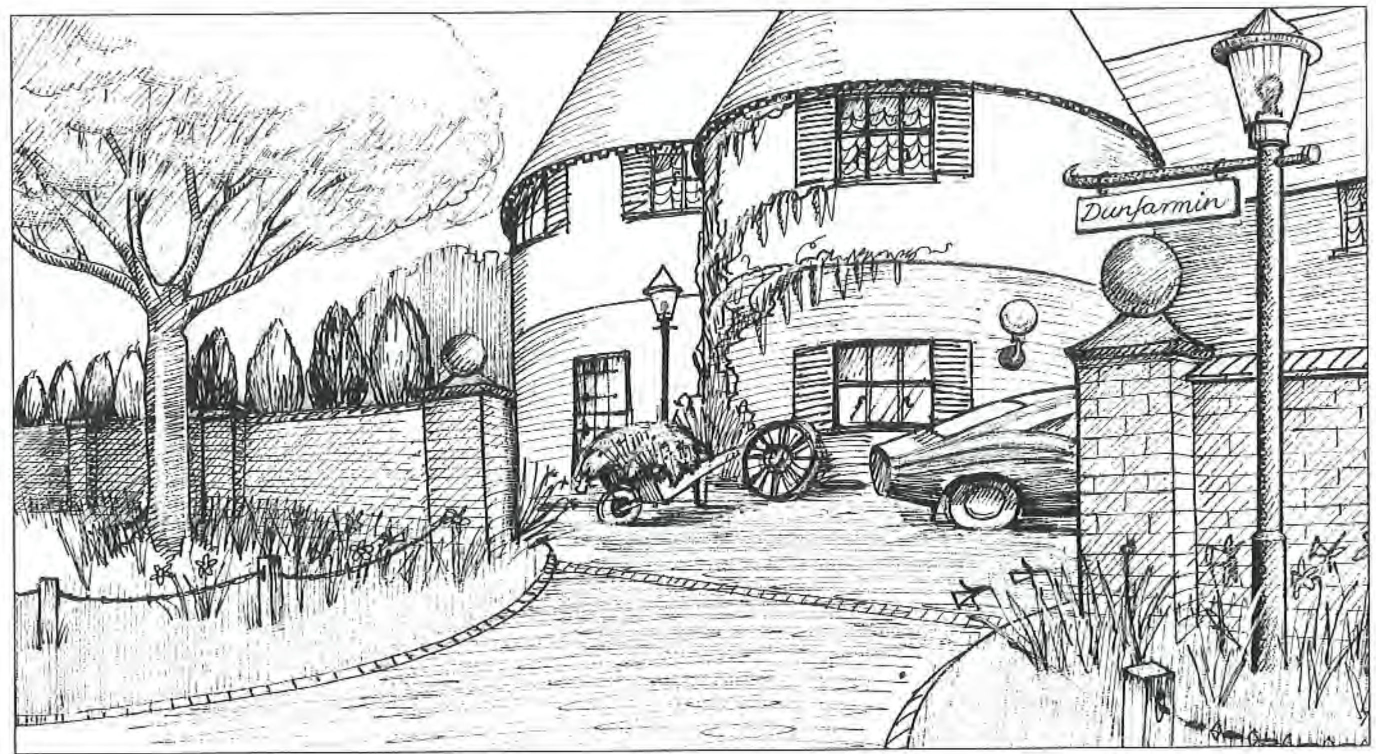
Pressures and change

Decline in landscape structure

Ponds

Ponds are a widespread feature in the AONB, although very few are of natural origin. Most once yielded stone, clay, iron ore or marl, whilst many others are old dams, or hammer-ponds or were dug to provide water for animals. With the exception of a few of these stock-ponds, these pools are now redundant industrial relics, no longer required for their original purposes. Nevertheless, they are a characteristic feature of the landscape and have acquired new values as wildlife habitats and for recreation, such as fishing and bird-watching.

Nowadays, unfortunately, many are overgrown with trees and brambles, which shade out the light and choke the water with rotting leaves. In these conditions, ponds quickly become stagnant and little wildlife is able to survive. Removal of the trees around the south side of the pond can significantly reduce the shading and leaf litter, turning a dank pool into a vibrant, wetland habitat. ▶



Suburbanisation ▲

Suburbanisation occurs when certain elements of property design or ornamentation, which are particularly identified with towns and the urban environment, are imported into the countryside. These imports show little regard for local character or style and can have a visually damaging effect on the unforced, understated quality of the landscape, from which the High Weald draws its beauty. Such elements may include mown verges protected by chains and bollards along country lanes; ornamental conifer hedges, especially those using alternate green and gold conifers; fancy brick walls, inset with concrete fretwork or olde worlde cart-wheels......

Psuedo-Victorian street-lamps, modern globe-lamps or carriage lamps and out-door security lights, which illuminate the surrounding countryside.......

Sugar-pink Japanese cherry trees, ornamental wheel-barrows and liver-pink tarmac drives speckled with white chippings.......

All of these examples give the typical British suburb a particular style and quality but they are rarely appropriate in the countryside of the High Weald.

Valerie Alford

Coppice woodland

Almost all the deciduous woods in the High Weald have been coppiced at some time in the past. Coppiced wood not only provided charcoal which fuelled the iron industry, but was also used extensively in building and agriculture. It was thus an immensely important part of the rural economy and every available tree was coppiced where possible, even those on steep banks or in hedges. Amongst the coppice stools, oak standards were often grown, not to be felled until big enough to provide large timber.

This process has been going on, almost continuously, since the High Weald was first settled. It is only since the beginning of this century that coppicing has declined, due to a fall in demand for coppice products and the fall in numbers of agricultural labourers. Although the High Weald still has more working coppice than anywhere else in Britain, most former coppices have been unmanaged since the Second World War. Many land-owners, therefore, now find themselves in a previously unknown situation, where old coppice stools now support several mature trunks, rather than a crop of thin poles. As these trunks grow, they gradually fall outwards and over, sometimes damaging the original stool as they do so.

◀ *Coppice poles in winter*

Regular coppice management allows periodic floods of light onto the woodland floor, providing ideal conditions for a wide diversity of woodland plants and animals. This form of management encourages the hazy sheets of bluebells which are such a familiar sight in the High Weald. If coppice woodlands are left unmanaged, however, the variety of wildlife will decline as a result of the constant shade and the trees will gradually collapse on to each other.

Coppicing requires regular management, however, which can be labour intensive and produces a large number of thin poles. Although there is considerable interest in grant-aid for traditional woodland management, the best incentive for the necessary time and expense involved during a period of dwindling farm incomes, would be an accessible market for the timber.

Sally Marsh

▲ *Hedge in decline*

◀ *Typical rich hedge*

Hedges

Hedges are a fundamental part of the High Weald. From a distance they impose a strong structure on the agricultural landscape, producing the chequer-board pattern so associated with the 'traditional' English countryside. At close quarters they are often a rich, intertwined mixture of shrubs and flowers, frequently towering above sunken roads, many of them remnant strips of ancient woodland.

Traditionally these hedges were layed or coppiced, providing a thicket of dense stems to prevent stock from escaping. Many of today's hedges, however, only have their tops trimmed. This encourages them to develop a bushy top, supported by occasional thick trunks, which cease to be stock-proof, eventually decaying and falling over. Such hedges are then replaced by wire fencing and the characteristic field pattern is lost.

Other pressures

Traffic pressure (pages 15 & 39)

Upper Medway

Kent Water

The gentle valley of the Kent Water meets the river Medway between Blackham and Fordcombe. To the north of this valley, the landscape is dominated by Dry Hill, which rises to 172m, topped by the ancient ramparts of an iron age hill fort. Dry Hill lies in the centre of a remarkably secluded pocket of the High Weald, where public access is by foot only, and many of the farmsteads lie far off the roads. The lower slopes of the hill are fissured with little ghylls, which drain either south into the Kent Water or north into the river Eden.

Many of these ghylls support strips of once coppiced woodland, where starry clusters of white wild garlic flowers smother the stream banks in early May, filling the air with the pungent scent of onions.

Elsewhere, large irregular blocks of woodland clothe the hill-sides. Some of these woods are abandoned coppice, whilst others are a tangle of conifer plantations and naturalised rhododendron. In winter the footpaths through these woods are a quagmire of thick, black leaf-mould and slippery clay, picking their way through shallow pits that are so frequent as to suggest that these woods were once war-torn mine-fields. In fact they were originally surface pits for iron extraction. The iron industry was a major presence in this area, with big forges at Scarletts Farm and Cowden.

Tucked away between these woods on the upper slopes of Dry Hill, is an area of orchards and soft fruit, protected from the wind by distinctive rows of Lombardy poplars. This was once an area of considerable hop and fruit production and occasional oast-houses still dot the landscape. The warm red local brick has long been used here, and there are a considerable number of

Weir Wood

Weir Wood reservoir lies at the head of the river Medway, in the small pocket of land between East Grinstead, West Hoathly and Forest Row, where the bracken-filled scrub woodland of Ashdown Forest runs into the small fields and copses of the Western High Weald.

From the most westerly ridge in this area, between Sharpthorne and Turners Hill, the valley falls steeply away towards Forest Row, the shimmering reservoir almost concealed by the dense trees of Great Wildgoose and Giffards Woods. This is an area of mixed agriculture, where small, damp pastures along the edge of the reservoir are mottled with clumps of dark green rushes whilst mounds of brambles twist through the hedges. Elsewhere larger arable fields are trimmed with narrow hedges and sporadic hedgerow trees. In the south and west many of the roadside trees are beech, which were once planted and laid for hedging and thrive on the well drained sandstones.

There are a number of beautiful and substantial country houses here, hidden between the woodlands and the valley slopes. Many were built with the wealth accumulated from the iron industry, whilst others, such as Standen, were a result of the gradual opening up of the Weald to the non-farming gentry. Designed by Philip Webb, Standen remains one of the least altered of the early twentieth century Arts and Crafts houses. To the west, William Robinson, the Victorian plantsman who pioneered 'naturalistic' planting in opposition to formal bedding, lived at Gravetye Manor.

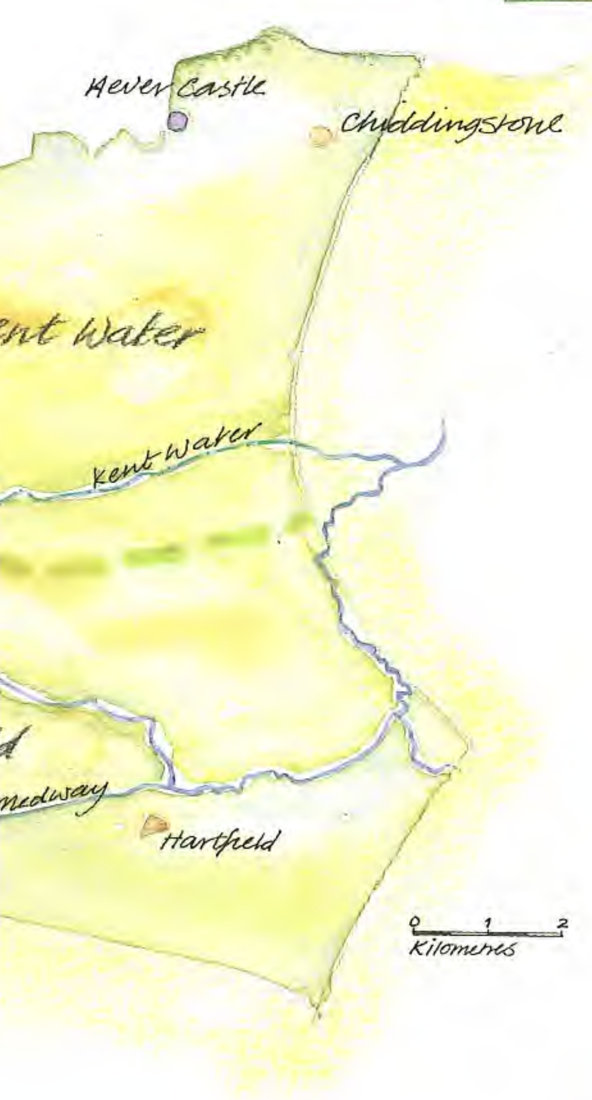
The focus of this valley, however, remains the reservoir, a vista of steel grey water, fringed with rushes and adorned by the angular silhouettes of cormorants, perched unmovingly on overhanging branches. Despite the popularity of the footpaths around the reservoir and of the rock outcrops at the western end, this valley retains a well-wooded, secluded feel, which belies the nearby presence of East Grinstead.

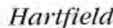
Weir Wood reservoir ▶

half timbered, half brick-built houses constructed during the urban expansion which occurred with the coming of the railways, in the nineteenth century.

North-east of Mark Beech the land begins to flatten out. Substantial coniferous and deciduous woodlands occur in a sweep from Chiddingstone Hoath to Hever, interspersed with large arable fields, which stretch between trimmed hedges or narrow shaws, as if hinting at the approaching boundary with the Low Weald and the flat Eden valley.

Dry Hill ▶





Hartfield

From Gills Lap, on the top of Ashdown Forest, the north-west corner of the High Weald looks like a series of gentle creases in the landscape. The Medway runs west to east, from Forest Row to Groombridge, paralleled by the Kent Water to the north. The narrow ridges between these rivers have a strongly defined pattern of hedges and shaws across their slopes and the valleys have an enclosed, tranquil feel. A narrow floodplain extends up the Medway valley as far as Hartfield, criss-crossed by tidy hedges and small groups of hedgerow trees. In the south, gorse and bracken, which flourish on Ashdown Forest, haunt the hedges and roadsides.

Sandstone, from Ashdown Forest and the smaller ridges, is widely used on farms and in villages, such as Forest Row and Hartfield, and a considerable amount of white painted weatherboarding occurs throughout this area. The former presence of the bygone iron industry is evident here from the many overgrown and ruined hammer ponds through which the Medway's tributaries now flow unhindered. Some larger ponds still remain, however, such as those at Bolebrook Castle and Hammerwood Park, hidden from general view by dense woodlands and thick fieldside shaws.

This area has a well-settled feel. A glance along the Medway valley from the B2110 reveals an orderly agricultural landscape predominantly of pasture and small blocks of deciduous woodland. Set deep within this peaceful countryside, the red-roofed farmsteads seem to have grown out of the valley sides at almost regular intervals. Indeed, it is the very tranquillity of these valleys which attracts people to the area and many of the old farm-buildings and occasional oasthouses have been converted into residences.

◀ *Medway Valley*

The Iron Foundry of England

Walking through the High Weald, there are continual hints of the iron ore which lies trapped between the sandstones and clays of the region. A thick reddish stain oozes down an exposed rockface beside a sunken lane; tiny streams smear their own channels with an orange sludge or occasionally a film of rusty-looking liquid collects in the corner of a waterlogged field.

These are the natural indications of the presence of iron; however, the High Weald is also littered with the remains of the iron industry, which flourished here from pre-Roman times up until the nineteenth century.

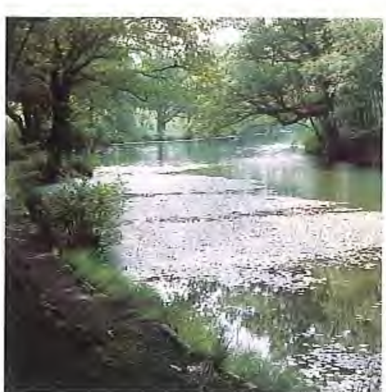
Iron ore was dug out from the surface, leaving shallow pits. Some were filled in again at the time, but many can still be seen in woodlands and field-edges all over the area.

Until the Middle Ages, the industry was small-scale and sporadic. The iron ore was easily accessible and there was a wealth of timber to fuel the smelting process. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, however, the industry turned to water power. By damming the local streams, lakes or hammer ponds were created, which powered water-wheels, themselves powering either the bellows for the forges, or the hammers for beating out the iron.

During this time, the Weald became an area of heavy industry; the woodlands echoed to the clang of hammers, palls of smoke rose continuously from the valleys and the roads were a sea of deeply-churned mud, impassable for most of the year. For three hundred years the High Weald was the iron-foundry of England, producing firstly pig-iron and then cannon.

By the eighteenth century, however, water and timber shortages, reductions in demand for cannon and an increase in the industrial use of coal in the north caused the rapid decline of the Wealden iron industry. By 1812 the last forge had closed.

Today the only remains of the industry are the silent hammer ponds, the smaller ore-pit ponds, the occasional iron gravestone and the wealth of iron-related place-names which still speckle our maps - Furnace Farm, Engine Wood, Cinder Hill, Forge Cottage, Hammer Wood.....



▲ *Former hammer pond*

◀ *Former hammer pond*

Ashdown

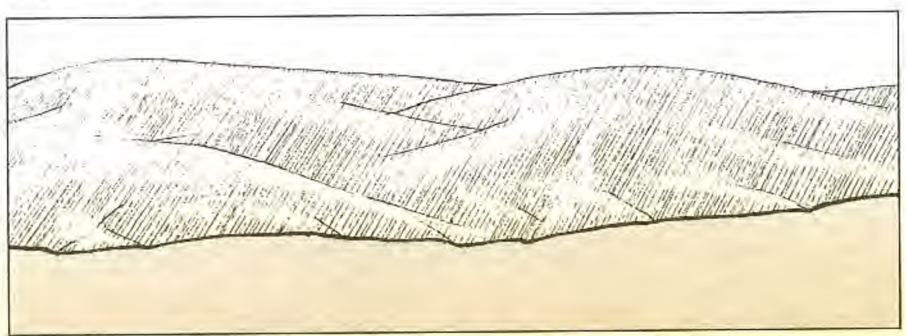
Landscape description

Ashdown Forest lies between Crowborough, Forest Row and Maresfield on the more northerly of the two major sandstone ridges in the AONB. The great, open sweeps of brown and yellow heathland stand out in stark contrast to the surrounding green luxuriance of the rest of the High Weald. In 1822, William Cobbett described the Forest as " heath, with here and there a few birch scrubs upon it, verily the most villainously ugly spot I ever saw in England." Nowadays it is regarded as one of the most beautiful parts of the High Weald, a place of great richness and diversity, with a unique history and status.

Ashdown Forest is the largest area of lowland heath in the South-East. It is a Site of Special Scientific Interest and is of international conservation interest. More than that, it is an area of solitude and space, where it is possible to feel a sense of isolation and wilderness rarely found elsewhere in the High Weald.

In fact, the Forest is as much a man-made environment as the farmland which surrounds it. In the Middle Ages it was a Royal deer park, reserved for hunting. There were, however, extensive Commoners rights over the land, allowing for collecting fuel and grazing stock, which have continued, with some modifications, to this day. The extent of the Forest where these rights were applicable, was definitively established in 1693 and has remained largely unaltered since then. It was this constant grazing which produced the open heathland.

Key Characteristics



Landform

Ashdown Forest is a large 'ring' of open heathland, interspersed with patches of scrub woodland, sitting on the highest part of the AONB. The landform is one of exposed heathy ridge-tops, wide, rolling valley slopes and steep-sided, intimate ghylls.

◄

Birch and Oak Woodland

Although the Forest is famous for its heathland, just over a third is in fact woodland, predominantly oak and birch. Whilst the birch grows quickly and prolifically, some of the oak is stunted and scrubby. Nevertheless, this woodland would quickly cover most of the Forest if unmanaged.

◄

Views

The Ashdown Forest area includes the highest point in the AONB. From its many hill-tops, such as Kings Standing and Gills Lap, extensive views stretch away over the Weald, as far as the North and South Downs. These views are an intrinsic part of the Forest, as important to the feeling of wilderness and freedom as the wide tracts of open heath.

◄

Today Ashdown Forest is a varied landscape of wet and dry heath, tracts of commercial conifers and considerable areas of oak and birch woodland. The centre of the Forest, which was once part of the mediaeval deer park, now includes areas which are under private ownership and a variety of land-uses, although the appearance of these areas is similar to the Forest itself and they form an integral part of its character.

Ian Graham

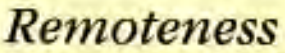
Scots Pines

Silhouetted against the gold and brown slopes are solitary Scots Pines, an introduction from the eighteenth century. Originally planted in ornamental clumps on the high points of the Forest, they also spread widely across the open heathland, some standing alone against the horizon, others scattered randomly in groups.

◀

Remoteness

Even at the height of summer, there are many areas where it is possible to explore without meeting other people. Walking on the Forest is not limited to footpaths and there are few restrictions on access, except in those areas of private ownership or military training. The apparently untamed, 'natural' quality of the landscape and the open, unfettered views create a sense of remoteness from the busy world beyond.



Open heathland

Ashdown Forest is characterised by the huge expanses of open heathland, which distinguish it from any other part of the AONB. The sheets of purple-brown and pale yellow, which make the heath so recognizable, are produced by the heather, gorse, moor grass and bracken which cover this area. On warm evenings, the scent of gorse and heather hangs almost tangibly in the air. ▶

Pressures and change

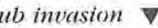
Scrub invasion

Ashdown Forest is owned by East Sussex County Council under the auspices of the Ashdown Forest Trust. The day to day running is regulated by a Board of Conservators, who have a long-term management plan. The overall aim is to preserve the current balance of 40% woodland and 60% heathland.

Heathland is created and maintained by constant mowing, whether by animal, machine or fire. The long history of the Forest is one of continuous grazing, both intentional and casual, and of frequent outbreaks of fire. Both of these activities have kept the spread of trees and scrub in check. Since the Second World War, however, this balance has altered. As the volume of traffic crossing the Forest has risen, it has become increasingly difficult and dangerous for the traditional unfenced grazing to continue. Browsing animals on the Forest is the right of the Forest Commoners, but the last major flock was removed in 1985, mainly due to unacceptable traffic casualties.

The decline in grazing results in an increase of scrub woodland. Alternative methods for keeping the scrub under control, such as mechanical cutting or herbicide, are neither as effective nor as publicly acceptable as grazing, and are very expensive. Fire is not used on the Forest because of the damage to wildlife and the difficulty of control. If the scrub is not restricted, however, the whole Forest will eventually become woodland, losing the open quality for which it is so noted.

Under these circumstances it is desirable to find a solution which will permit grazing to take place again without allowing unacceptable numbers of road deaths, both animal and human, and without restricting public access and enjoyment of the freedom of the Forest.



Scrub invasion ▼

▼ *Open heathland*

Visitor pressure

Ashdown Forest is the largest, natural open space for recreation available to the population of South London. In addition there are several major urban centres within a short distance and it is crossed by one of the major roads from the capital to the coast. There are a considerable number of other tourist attractions in the immediate vicinity and it is home to probably the best-loved of children's stories - those of Winnie-the-Pooh. Most importantly, however, it has a wildness and sense of space which contrasts strongly with the intimate charm of most of the rest of the High Weald and, indeed, the South-East. For all these reasons, Ashdown Forest attracts a large number of visitors, not just in the summer, but throughout the year.

These visitors, however, are a potential threat to the very qualities they come to enjoy. Most reach the Forest by car, creating pollution and congestion and the need for considerable areas for car-parking and many visitors exercise dogs on the Forest. Studies have shown that whilst animals, such as deer, can learn to accept the military presence within their territories, they cannot easily co-exist with large numbers of dogs.

The fragile ecology of the Forest is very vulnerable to disturbance. Some rare plants and animals, such as the Dartford Warbler, teeter on the edge of extinction here, whilst popular tracks are literally worn away by too many feet and hooves on the delicate skin of peat.

Visitor pressure ▶

Traffic pressure

Ashdown Forest is crossed by several busy roads, including the main A22 London to Eastbourne trunk road. The influence of these roads leads to three major problems : -

Pollution

The constant stream of cars crossing the forest causes air, noise and visual pollution. The remote, wild quality of the Forest is severely damaged by the constant hum and roar of traffic, whilst the air pollution from hundreds of exhaust pipes coats the roadside vegetation and fouls the very air which many come to enjoy. Many of the roads run on or near the ridges of the Forest and there are several long stretches which are highly visible from a distance, including the A22 south of Chelwood Vachery and the B2026 from Camp Hill to Gill's Lap.

Road casualties

As traffic volumes in the High Weald rise, increasing numbers of vehicles pass through Ashdown Forest, often to avoid congestion elsewhere, notably in East Grinstead. Traffic speeds tend to be high on some roads, especially during the rush-hour, and considerable numbers of animals are killed. In 1992, Forest Rangers were called out to deal with eighty-nine deer casualties. The volume and speed of traffic across the Forest also reduces the safety and enjoyment of the many pedestrians and horse-riders who come there for peace and recreation.

Effects on grazing rights and management

Ashdown Forest has traditionally been grazed by a variety of animals, including sheep, deer, swine, horses and cattle. Most of these have belonged to the Commoners, who have been exercising their rights, such as those of pannage (grazing swine) and agistment (leasing of grazing) since the early Middle Ages. This constant browsing has preserved the heathland of the Forest. Since the steady rise in traffic numbers and speeds, however, there has been a sharp reduction in the number of Commoners willing to allow their stock to graze on unfenced heathland. In order to preserve the heathland, temporary permission has been sought for fencing part of the Forest to re-establish grazing. Fencing is not seen as the most appropriate long-term solution, however. A reduction in traffic speeds and numbers through traffic calming and management, could allow a return to unfenced grazing and should, therefore, provide the best long-term solution.

Traffic at Gill's Lap ▲

▼ *Traffic at Stonehill*

Military presence

The Ministry of Defence has a constant presence on the Forest, using certain areas, such as Pippingford Park, to carry out training exercises. Although their presence is relatively low-key, there are some startling reminders, such as the Listening Station and aerial near Camp Hill and the large Training Camp near Crowborough. Paradoxically, however, this seemingly disruptive influence is not a major threat to the wildlife of the Forest, which appear to have acclimatised to the occasional company of soldiers jogging past. Indeed the M.O.D., in isolating the land from wide-spread public use and controlling the spread of scrub woodland, help to preserve the delicate ecology of these areas from pressures faced by other parts of the Forest. Thus these areas of land, although currently outside the guardianship of the Trust, still form a fundamental part of the character of Ashdown Forest.

The Listening Station ▶

Rebecca Warren

Ashdown

Flora

A casual stroll across the heathland seems to reveal a continuous expanse of heather, gorse and purple moor grass. Infact the Forest has a very rich and specialised vegetation, adapted to the acidity of the soils. Amongst its particular features are the yellow patches of bog asphodel (*Narthecium ossifragum*) and the carnivorous sundews (*Drosera rotundifolia and D.intermedia)* which both haunt the wetter slopes. So, too, do perhaps the best known rarity here, the marsh gentians (*Gentiana pneumonanthe*), whose delicate blue flowers seem almost too fragile to compete against the tough grasses. The Forest is also home to several rare ferns and mosses, including the marsh fern (*Thelypteris palustre*) and the beech fern (*Thelypteris phegopteris*), which lurk in the damper woodland areas. The botanical importance of the area, however, lies not just in the existance of small colonies of rarities, but in its great size. This means that if a small patch of unusual vegetation is destroyed, there is a chance that it will have survived elsewhere on the Forest and will thus be able to recolonise. It is, therefore, vital that the integrity of the entire ecosystem is maintained.

▼ *Marsh Gentian*

Alex Tait

Fauna

Whilst most people are aware of the distinctive vegetation of the Forest, far fewer ever see the animals which live there. Fallow deer, descended from the flock kept here in the Middle Ages, live in the woodlands of Pippingford Park, wandering out on to the open Forest to feed at night, whilst roe deer also browse the heath. Adders are occasionally to be seen basking in the sun and tiny brown common lizards flicker out of sight at the approach of danger. Sometimes the nocturnal nightjar, whose camouflaged feathers hide it from the most avid birdwatcher, can be heard calling at dusk. There is also a specialised insect population, amongst which the Silver-studded Blue butterfly is a rare but highly valued member.

There are thirty six known species of ant crawling across the Forest floor and an abundance of different dragon-flies patrol the pools and streams. The specialised habitats have preserved a unique and valuable ecology, whose importance is not just scientific but visual and cultural.

◀ *Silver-studded Blue*

Alex Tait

Landscape

The Forest landscape is a blend of historical remains and contemporary pressures. Ancient habitats and features survive amongst twentieth century uses and modifications. Although part of the beauty of Ashdown is its initial uniformity of appearance - the long stretches of heath, the dense cloaks of woodland - its true value lies in its mosaic of landscapes and habitats. The bites of private land which have nibbled away at the boundaries, creating pockets of vivid green pasture, have not degraded the character of the Forest. The expanses of wood and parkland in the middle, containing amongst others the estates at Old Lodge and Pippingford Park, and partly used by the M.O.D., are nevertheless fundemental to the integrity of the designated Forest, whilst some areas are part of the SSSI. Despite the boundary drawn up in 1693, there are no hard lines on the ground here and the character and value of the Forest depend on its continued treatment as an interrelated whole.

Near Kings Standing ▶

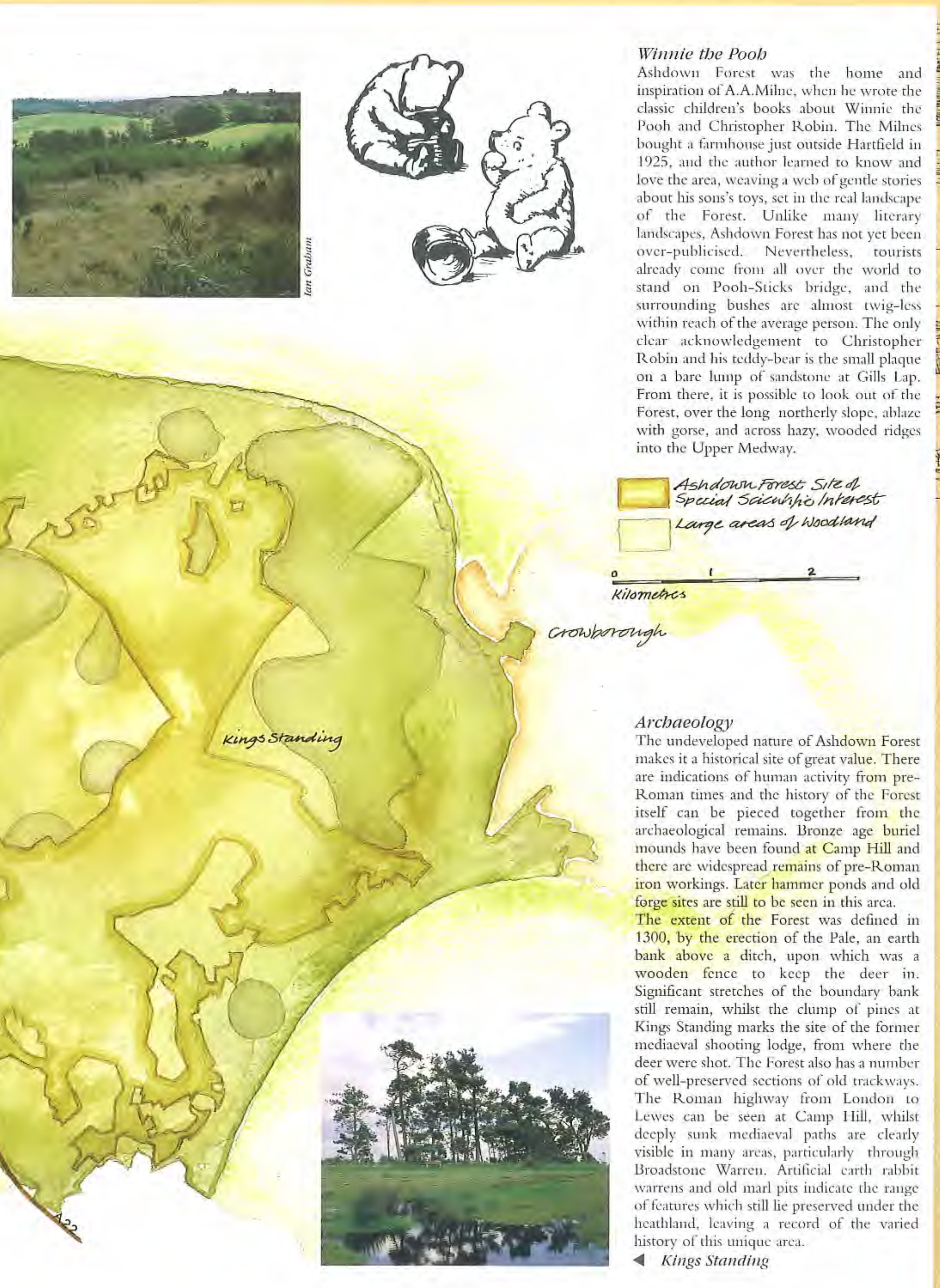
Forest Row

Pippingford Park

county boundary

A22

Nutley



Winnie the Pooh

Ashdown Forest was the home and inspiration of A.A.Milne, when he wrote the classic children's books about Winnie the Pooh and Christopher Robin. The Milnes bought a farmhouse just outside Hartfield in 1925, and the author learned to know and love the area, weaving a web of gentle stories about his sons's toys, set in the real landscape of the Forest. Unlike many literary landscapes, Ashdown Forest has not yet been over-publicised. Nevertheless, tourists already come from all over the world to stand on Pooh-Sticks bridge, and the surrounding bushes are almost twig-less within reach of the average person. The only clear acknowledgement to Christopher Robin and his teddy-bear is the small plaque on a bare lump of sandstone at Gills Lap. From there, it is possible to look out of the Forest, over the long northerly slope, ablaze with gorse, and across hazy, wooded ridges into the Upper Medway.

Archaeology

The undeveloped nature of Ashdown Forest makes it a historical site of great value. There are indications of human activity from pre-Roman times and the history of the Forest itself can be pieced together from the archaeological remains. Bronze age buriel mounds have been found at Camp Hill and there are widespread remains of pre-Roman iron workings. Later hammer ponds and old forge sites are still to be seen in this area.

The extent of the Forest was defined in 1300, by the erection of the Pale, an earth bank above a ditch, upon which was a wooden fence to keep the deer in. Significant stretches of the boundary bank still remain, whilst the clump of pines at Kings Standing marks the site of the former mediaeval shooting lodge, from where the deer were shot. The Forest also has a number of well-preserved sections of old trackways. The Roman highway from London to Lewes can be seen at Camp Hill, whilst deeply sunk mediaeval paths are clearly visible in many areas, particularly through Broadstone Warren. Artificial earth rabbit warrens and old marl pits indicate the range of features which still lie preserved under the heathland, leaving a record of the varied history of this unique area.

◄ *Kings Standing*

Art and Literature

Despite the picturesque qualities of the AONB, the High Weald has never inspired a school of artists in its own right. Perhaps the only artistic perception of the region as a whole is to be found in the sudden growth in country houses and gardens in the late nineteenth century. The High Weald was seen then as a rural idyll of rolling wooded ridges, sheltered south-facing slopes and lush vegetation. Such views were actually perceived as part of the design of houses such as Standen near East Grinstead.

Nevertheless the High Weald has been the inspiration for several very different artists and authors, each drawing on different facets of the area. In the 1850s the painter F.D.Hardy 'discovered' Cranbrook and for a few years a small group of artists - the 'Cranbrook Colony' - used the town as the setting for their meticulously studied paintings. At the same time William Holman Hunt, one of the leading Pre-Raphaelite painters, worked occasionally at Winchelsea and Fairlight near Hastings, capturing the vibrant colours and dramatic landscape of the High Weald coast.

As the Weald became more accessible, it came increasingly to provide the rural inspiration for many artists and writers living in the rapidly expanding capital. Two particularly well-known English authors chose independantly to settle here around the turn of the century, each in their different way capturing something of the landscape for a wider audience. A.A.Milne drew on Ashdown Forest for the backdrop to his tales about Christopher Robin and Winnie-the-Pooh, evoking in a few simple lines the sandy heathland, dotted with Scots Pines. At Burwash, however, Rudyard Kipling was using the typical Wealden hills and woodlands with their long history and legends to conjure up the setting for his Sussex poems and stories, such as Puck of Pooks Hill.

"They were fishing, a few days later, in the bed of the brook that for centuries had cut deep into the soft valley soil. The trees closing overhead made long tunnels through which the sunshine worked in blobs and patches. Down in the tunnels were bars of sand and gravel, old roots and trunks covered with moss or painted red by the irony water; foxgloves growing lean and pale towards the light; clumps of fern and thirsty shy flowers who could not live away from moisture and shade...."

▲ *Pooh Bridge*

◀ *"Our English Coasts" by William Holman Hunt, capturing the Fairlight coast*

Central High Weald

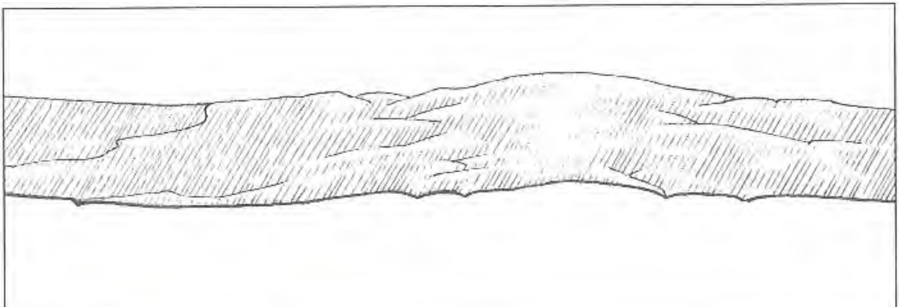
Landscape description

The Central High Weald surrounds Tunbridge Wells, which exerts a strong influence on the neighbouring countryside. It extends south to Crowborough, west to Chiddingstone and east to Pembury and Bayham.

This is the landscape of the great estates, such as Penshurst Place, where dignified expanses of parkland impart a genteel appearance to the countryside. Much of this landscape can be seen from the Mark Cross to Tunbridge Wells ridge, from where the overall impression is of large commercial woodlands and unintensive pastures, interspersed with sweeps of parkland and occasional orchards. Along the northern reaches of the Medway valley beyond Penshurst, the woodlands are replaced by wide arable fields, whilst the steep valleys around Speldhurst and Bidborough are a patchwork of tiny meadows and strips of ghyll woodland.

Despite the peaceful, timeless quality of this landscape, this was an industrial district in the later Middle Ages, with major iron-workings at Eridge Park and Bayham and, in the nineteenth century, paper mills at Chafford.

Many of the houses, especially those belonging to the large estates, are built of local sandstone, whilst the farms which nestle into the valley slopes off the ridge are frequently of warm red brick and tile, sometimes partially timber-framed. Many of these farmsteads are actually a group of several buildings, including barns and cottages, where several farmworkers' families would have lived. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when



Landform

Tunbridge Wells lies on a ridge. Around the edges of this ridge, especially at Speldhurst and Bayham, steep ghylls descend into the more open, rolling valleys of the River Medway and River Teise. In the north beyond Penshurst, the landscape flattens out towards the valley of the River Eden.

◀

Large tracts of woodland

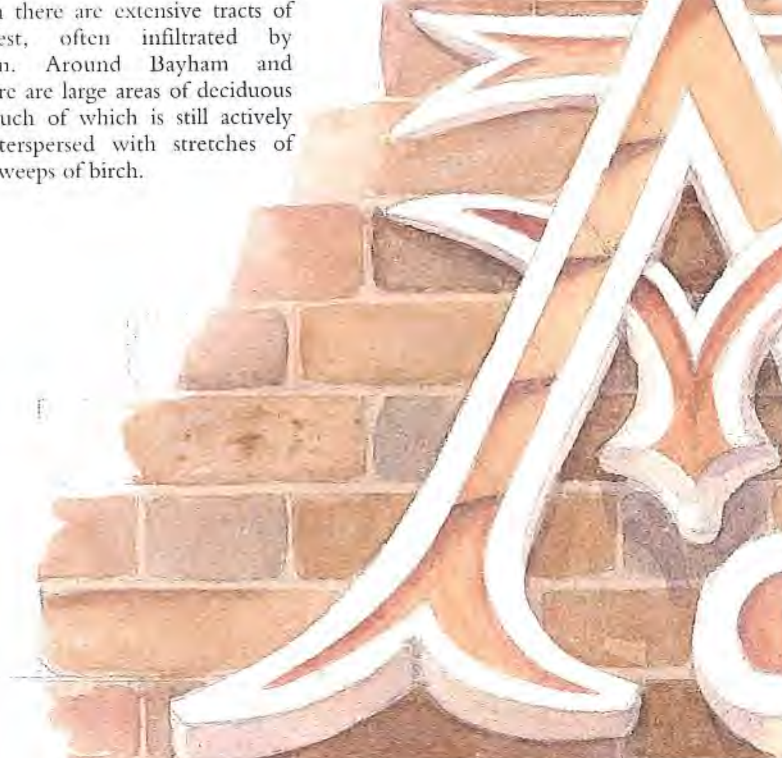
Woodland clothes a considerable part of this area. Between Tunbridge Wells and Crowborough there are extensive tracts of conifer forest, often infiltrated by rhododendron. Around Bayham and Pembury, there are large areas of deciduous woodland, much of which is still actively coppiced, interspersed with stretches of conifers and sweeps of birch.

◀

Estate cottages and buildings

Many cottages in this area bear decorative crests or plaques, indentifying past or present ownership by a particular estate. On the Abergavenny estate, Eridge Park, many of the buildings have an elaborate 'A', whilst around Penshurst the ornamental 'S' of the Sydney family is used. Some buildings display pictorial plaques, whilst others have a simple terracotta rose or painted shield. These features provide a visible record of historical land-ownerships.

▶



hops became widely used in beer, almost every farm in this area had a hop-garden. Nowadays they have almost all gone, but the red-tiled, white-cowled oast-houses still haunt the farmyards and in springtime, wavering, green arms of naturalised hops still reach up from the hedges, as if searching for the long-lost hop-poles.

Tunbridge Wells, founded in 1606 around one of the local iron-rich springs, has gradually influenced the character of this part of the High Weald. As wealth and employment have been created, so the pressure on this landscape has increased. Developers are eager to build on the surrounding fields, commuters use the tiny lanes to avoid the busy main roads and the local population find recreation and escape amongst the gentle slopes of this area.

Ian Graham

Parklands

This area is particularly rich in historic parkland. The extent and frequency of these parks have a strong impact on the countryside. Within the tidy and confined agricultural landscape of the High Weald, these parklands offer a distinct contrast of irregular sweeps of pasture, interspersed with elegant clumps of trees. Some estates have distinctive boundary fences and lodges, which contribute to the ornamental feel of ◀ the landscape.

Sandstone outcrops

There are several major outcrops of exposed sandstone in this area, the most famous of which is High Rocks, near Tunbridge Wells. Weathering has eroded these rocks, so that they loom out of the landscape in small, rounded cliffs, sculpted into impossibly precarious shapes. Beech and birch trees appear to grow out of the stone itself, their roots surging and tumbling down clefts in the rock face. ▶

Sandstone and timber buildings

Local sandstone is a widely used building material in this area, its golds and yellows enlivening many of the local churches and houses. In the nineteenth century, a combination of stone and highly decorative black and white timber-framing became fashionable, especially on the large estates, such as Penshurst.

◀

Special Features

Estates

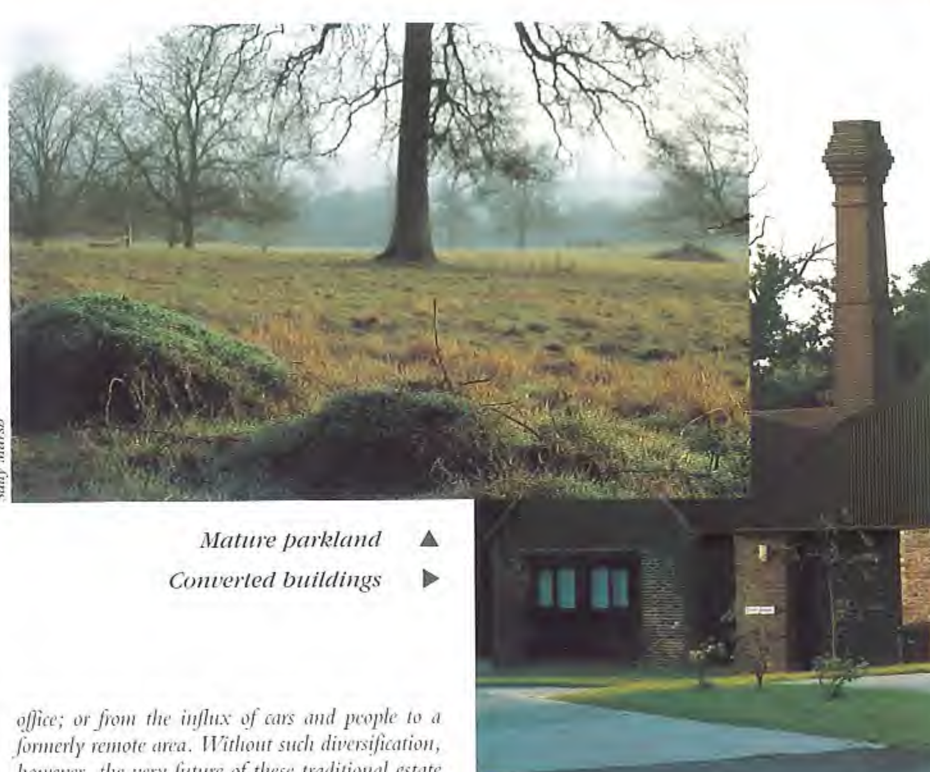
There is a large amount of parkland in this area, including the estates of Bayham Abbey, Penshurst Place, Eridge Park, Chiddingstone Castle, Pembury Hall and Groombridge Place. These parks, with their sweeps of pasture and elegant spreading trees, contrast with the neat patchwork of farmland elsewhere in the AONB and impart a particular character to this landscape.

The current financial pressures on land-owners, however, are causing a reduction in available funds for the maintainance of 'uneconomic' parkland features, such as follies and specimen trees, which is leading to the gradual decay of these landscapes. Many estates are diversifying to survive.

These measures may include......

Conversion of estate buildings into commercial units
Hiring property and grounds for recreation events
Creation of cross-country riding courses
Commercial shooting and fishing on estate land

Almost all diversification measures will have some impact on the character of the individual estate. These changes may result from the change in use of buildings, for example from barn to 'hi-tec' office; or from the influx of cars and people to a formerly remote area. Without such diversification, however, the very future of these traditional estate landscapes may be at stake.



Sally Marsh

Mature parkland ▲

Converted buildings ▶

Pressures and change

Urban edge development pressure

Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge impose considerable pressures on the AONB in this area : -

Sally Marsh

Creeping landscape degradation ▲

Stretches of countryside along the edges of towns are often subject to unofficial land-uses, such as rubbish-dumping, motor-cycling, dog-walking and informal childrens play. Although these individual activities may be small-scale, they can lead to landscape degradation. Not only is the attractiveness of the landscape thus diminished, but it may become neglected and, therefore, vulnerable to development.

Visual degradation ▲

Although the AONB has a designated boundary, external features may still have an important part to play in its particular quality and character. For example, the extensive views over Kent from Bidborough are an intrinsic part of the beauty and character of that area. In the same way, expanses of industrial workshops and factories forming a backdrop to the AONB can seriously detract from the charm of that particular landscape.

Habitat degradation ▲

Urban edge land within the AONB can be particularly at risk from changes in management. If the traditional land-use alters, delicate natural habitats can be lost, either intentionally or through lack of awareness. The small, unimproved pastures near Tunbridge Wells, for example, are especially vulnerable to this process, as they are increasingly being acquired for pony grazing or extended gardens.

Rebecca Warren

Rebecca Warren

Estate plaques of the Central High Weald

Traffic pressure

Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells attract considerable levels of traffic, either into the towns themselves or passing through. As the volumes increase, the main roads are widened or re-routed. Redundant sections of road are often abandoned and called lay-bys. Smaller roads and lanes, which are used as 'rat-runs' by commuting traffic, or by tourists visiting the countryside, gradually become so choked that they too are up-graded or enlarged. The effect of these road 'improvements' is not only to change the tranquil, rural character of the AONB, but also to encourage the very traffic which causes them. ▼

Recreation

The proximity of large urban centres imposes considerable pressure for recreation opportunities on the landscape. In this area these take two main forms :-

Erosion of rights of way

The soft Wealden clay quickly becomes churned up and rutted by continual trampling. This leads to the gradual widening of paths, as walkers skirt around the edges in search of drier land.

Rock-climbing

This is the only area in the High Weald with major rock outcrops suitable for climbing. This activity, however, causes damage in several ways. The continual movement of ropes and bodies over the rocks erodes the surface of the sandstone, which would otherwise form a hard crust. The rock therefore becomes particularly susceptible to constant weathering. The ropes themselves also leave deep furrows on the edges of the rocks, whilst the soft soil around the base of the outcrops is worn away by continual scrambling. Erosion control techniques, however, can look unnatural and ugly.
◄

Other pressures

Decline in landscape structure (page22-23)
Suburbanisation (page 22)

Penshurst

The influence of the river Medway pervades this area. The tiny tributaries which feed into the river have eroded the sandstone ridge around Speldhurst and Southborough. Most of this land is unintensively grazed and woodland is largely confined to the deep ghylls which dissect the edges of the ridge. This area is criss-crossed by a number of small lanes, lined by villas and cottages creeping out into the countryside. As the Medway passes Penshurst, it joins the river Eden. The valley widens out and the surrounding land gradually flattens, encouraging arable cultivation, in large fields, enclosed by trimmed hedges. In the north, around Bidborough, magnificent views stretch across Kent to the greensand ridge and the North Downs.

This is a densely-populated area of small villages and farmsteads, where the local sandstone is frequently used for building. The combination of available local materials and the patronage of the local estates during the nineteenth century, produced a distinctive style of sandstone and decorative timber-framing, often embellished with ornamental estate emblems and date-stones. The same sandstone protrudes naturally around the western edge of Tunbridge Wells, ranging from the dramatic outcrops at High Rocks to small patches of exposed stone along the roadside, hidden under a tumble of gorse and bracken. In the north and west, away from the sandstone ridge, timber-framing and tile-hanging are more common and the valley slopes are dotted with red-brick oast-houses and weatherboarded barns.

◄ *Pensburst village*

Eridge

In contrast to the tight and tidy fields which cover much of the High Weald, the expanses of parkland and forest in Eridge have an untamed appearance. Huge tracts of woodland stretch from Tunbridge Wells down to Crowborough, a mixture of conifer plantation, birch and mixed coppice. Along the edges of these woodlands, laurel and rhododendron - deliberately planted in the nineteenth century as cover for game-birds - crowd out into the light.

Eridge Park, stretching between Frant and Eridge, has an open, unconfined feel, a rolling vista of rough pasture dotted with ornamental clumps of trees and huge specimen oaks and beeches. The Park has been in the ownership of the Neville family since at least 1456. Despite the once substantial iron-workings, and their legacy of beautiful hammerponds still visible today, most of this land has been park since the thirteenth century. This unusual continuity of land-use has resulted in the survival of a particularly rich selection of insects and lichens, now rare in the South-east.

The most spectacular features in this landscape, however, are the massive sandstone cliffs, surprisingly hidden amongst the gentle folds of woodland. Seen at dusk, or come across unexpectedly, the sheer scale of these outcrops is almost unsettling, in the man-made landscape of the High Weald.

◄ *Woodlands near Eridge*

Pembury

This is a small, secretive pocket of woodland, mature parkland and pasture. Despite the proximity of Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge, there are surprisingly few houses, but the presence of the towns is felt through the roar of the traffic on the A21, which slices through this area, and the looming industrial estates which stalk the northern boundary of the AONB.

Nevertheless, the thick woodland cloaking the little valleys below Southborough and the gentle sweeps of parkland around Pembury Hall give this area a remote, leisured quality. The small scale of the landscape and the frequent thickets of laurel and rhododendron, allow the area to absorb considerable numbers of people walking or cycling, without detracting from the peacefulness. Along the north-eastern boundary, towards Tudely and Capel, the fields flatten out into the Medway valley and coppiced woodlands give way to Kentish orchards.

Bayham

The traditional pattern of Wealden land-use is still to be found in this area. On the shallower slopes, sheep graze the pastures, whilst the steeper hill-sides are clothed by large areas of deciduous woodland. In these woods, when the winter trees are bare, the whine of chainsaws and the acrid smell of woodsmoke give away the presence of small gangs of coppice-workers cutting out the young poles to be used for fencing or firewood. The short cycle of cutting and regrowth, taking place in the sweet chestnut stands perhaps every 15-20 years, changes the appearance of this area from year to year, so that the open glade of one spring becomes the dense thicket of the next. Constant throughout the seasons, however, are the tall oaks and Scots Pines, which remain unharvested between the coppice-stools. Below the woodlands, in the Teise valley, lies Bayham Park, originally designed by Humphrey Repton. Within this landscape, the ruined walls of Bayham Abbey rear up from the flat valley bottom like an ancient skeleton washed clean by the nearby river.

Most of the farms here have oast-houses, a reminder of the wide-spread hop-gardens in the nineteenth century, none of which now remain. Today, ease of access to Tunbridge Wells has seen most of these farms and oast-houses climb the social ladder under the influence of non-agricultural wealth and the release from the necessity of farming.

Throughout this area, tiny roads squeeze between small fields and thick hedges, and secretive green lanes entice the passer-by onto a maze of sunken footpaths and almost forgotten tracks.

◀ *Bayham Abbey*

Views

From the South Downs the Weald seems to be, even today, an almost unbroken expanse of dense woodland. A closer look reveals a detailed agricultural tapestry of field, woodland and orchard, resulting from a long partnership between man and nature. Indeed much of the quality of the High Weald seems to lie in its detail - the small-scale of its farmland, the intimacy of its landform, the lushness of its vegetation.......And yet, these immediate charms conceal a landscape of far greater depth. Climbing yet another small hill, between high hedges and dense woodlands, the traveller passes an open gateway and suddenly a spectacular view opens up, stretching away over rolling ridges far into the hazy, blue horizon.

The High Weald is thus a region of contrasts; although much of its charm and beauty results from the small scale and intimacy of its little ridges and valleys, it is these very ridges which provide the magnificent, open views across the landscape and prevent it from becoming claustrophobic.

Within the AONB there are several viewpoints of particular note. From Fairlight church the landscape unfolds into the distance like a map, from where it is possible to see across to the Upper Rother Valley. Crowborough Beacon on the Southern Slopes and Goudhurst in the Kentish High Weald both offer immense panoramas across the countryside, whilst at Ashdown Forest there is a sense of being on the roof of the Weald, with vast horizons visible in almost every direction.

As most roads in the High Weald lie on the ridgetops, there is a wealth of beautiful views across the landscape. Many, however, are glimpsed only briefly. When coppicing of woods and hedges was commonly practised, views were constantly revealed or obscured for a few years, only to reappear from a different angle or across a different slope. Today these views are harder to find, often requiring exploration on foot around hedges and through woodlands. Happily, however, the quality is undiminished, making such diversions well worth the effort.

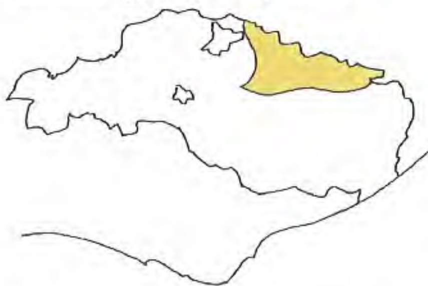
Sally Marsh

▲ *South from Goudhurst*

◀ *From Fairlight*

Kentish High Weald

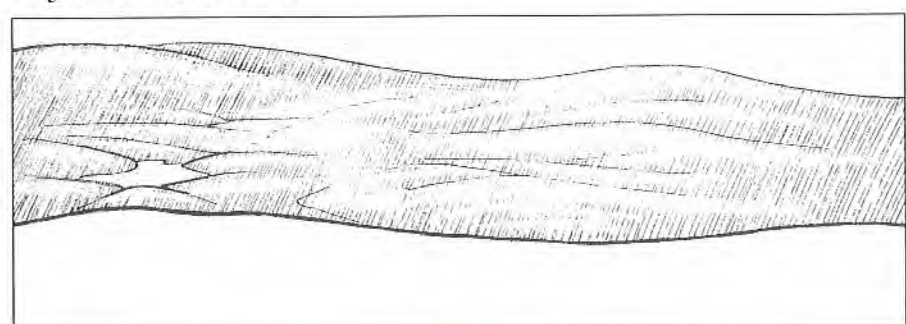
Landscape description



The Kentish High Weald stretches from Pembury to Rolvenden, including Lamberhurst, Bewl Water and Bedgebury Forest. This landscape has a general north-easterly orientation and, from the higher land between Pembury and Lamberhurst, around the southern edge of Bewl Water and between Goudhurst and Benenden, long views stretch out over the Kent Weald towards the North Downs. Kent is known as the Garden of England and the Kentish High Weald plays an important part in this tradition. This is a richly textured landscape, where the angular patterns of orchard and hop-garden contrast with smooth sweeps of arable or unintensively grazed pasture. Despite a continuing decline in fruit cultivation, this area still owes its gardenesque feel to the abundant orchards and hop gardens. Once, however, this landscape was famous, not for its fruit but its cloth. Flemish weavers, settling here in the fourteenth century, built up a thriving woollen-industry centred on Cranbrook. Until the seventeenth century, this industry remained a major source of employment and the wealth accumulated by the wool-merchants is evident from the substantial mediaeval houses in the town.

This tapestry of land-uses is set within a framework of dense shaws, thick hedges and stretches of broad-leaved woodland, some of which are still coppiced. The large conifer forests at Bedgebury, Hemsted and around Bewl Water, uphold the tradition of commercial timber production in the

Key Characteristics



Landform

Several minor ridges, running north-west from Pembury and south-east to Tenterden, define this area. The River Teise cuts through these ridges at Lamberhurst and Goudhurst, whilst to the south Bewl Water is enclosed by gentle ridges. In the fruit belt around Matfield there are a number of small ghylls, whilst the ground gradually becomes flatter and more open towards Cranbrook and Tenterden.

◀

Tall hedges and shaws

With the new leaves in May, the network of lanes becomes a maze of tunnels, as tall hedges tower above the roadsides and the overgrown shaws reach out to each other over the tarmac. The sunlight filters only dimly through the dense canopies and views are restricted to the way ahead. Viewed across the wider landscape, these shaws and hedges appear to merge, creating the illusion of continuous woodland. ▶

Orchards and shelterbelt hedges

The north-eastern slopes are chequered with small fields of fruit-trees, sheltered from wind and frost by tall hedges. The trees in these orchards are planted in neat rows, giving the landscape a complicated criss-crossed pattern, like a patchwork of corduroy. Where former orchards no longer exist, the tall windbreak hedges often remain around the fields, as if still guarding their lost fruit-trees.

◀

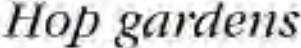
High Weald, their expanses of deep green enriching the countryside during the winter. This is a well-settled area, where it is rare to be out of sight of farmstead or cottage. Oasthouses dot the landscape, some tiled and some asphalted, and in the east windmills form occasional local landmarks. Many of the villages are of picture-postcard quality, their rose-covered cottages clustering around a pond or tiny green, the local pub sharing its tourist trade with the stone-built church beyond. Nevertheless, this charming image conceals a landscape under pressure, as agriculture becomes increasingly difficult to sustain, and redundant fruit packing sheds are now found housing Apple-mac computers rather than apples.....

White weatherboarding

Where tile-hanging is less common, especially in the east, white weatherboarding is very characteristic, often cladding the buildings from top to toe. Cranbrook is particularly well-known for the white facades of its High Street, but several smaller villages, such as Rolvenden, can boast equally pretty frontages. ◀

Tile-hanging

Many of the buildings in this area are hung with red tiles. In contrast to other areas of the High Weald, it is not unusual to find these tiles stretching from ground-level to the eaves, entirely concealing the beams underneath. In sunlight, these deep reds and terracottas almost glow, so that tile-hung villages, such as Goudhurst, seem to exude a warmth of their own. ▶



Hop gardens

Hops are still grown in this part of the High Weald, although not so widely as they once were. Although the hop-bines are cut down in September, the stark rows of poles, up which they climb, stand in the fields all year long. Former hop-gardens can be traced by the naturalised hops growing out of the hedges, their wavering shoots clasping each other hopelessly in search of support. ▶

Sally Marsh

Pressures and change

Loss of orchards

Commercial orchards in the Kentish High Weald have declined by over 30% since 1961 and the trend is continuing. Orchards in Britain are particularly vulnerable to pests, diseases, bad weather and an unpredictable market, so that long-term investment can be a substantial risk. Although new strains of apple-tree can bear fruit within three to four years of planting, pears may take ten years to produce a crop.
The decline in orchards has four principal effects on the landscape :-

Loss of features

The rich variety of colour and texture in the landscape is lost and the pink and white flushed blossom, for which Kent is so famous, no longer cloaks the countryside as it once did.

Orchard loss ▶

Valerie Alford

Loss of hedgerows

The traditional tall hedges are no longer needed to shelter the orchards and may be grubbed out. Where these hedges are non-native trees, such as leylandii cyprus, their removal can be beneficial to the landscape. Loss of native hedges, however, will alter the local character. In some instances they are not replaced, thus losing the distinctive small-scale field pattern, whilst in others they may be replaced simply with barbed wire......

◀ *Hedgerow loss*

Redundant buildings

Most commercial orchards have associated buildings such as fruit packing sheds or warehouses. Once the orchards are removed, these buildings become redundant, awaiting a new use or just decaying. In some areas, this can provide new opportunities for rurally-located businesses; others may simply degenerate.

◀ *Redundant buildings*

Valerie Alford

Diversification

Once the orchards have been grubbed out, the land becomes vacant. It may then be used for other agricultural crops or pasture or, in some cases, it may come under pressure for development.

◀◀ *Shelterbelt hedges around pasture*

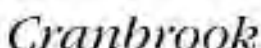
◀ *Former orchard at Horsmonden*

Special Features

Goudhurst

Goudhurst has one of the most dramatic sites in the High Weald. Perched on a narrow ridge above the Teise Valley, this village commands spectacular views across the Low Weald of Kent and across the High Weald towards the South Downs. The village is centred around a small green and village pond, behind which the main street is flanked by red tile-hung buildings as it climbs up to the church. ▶

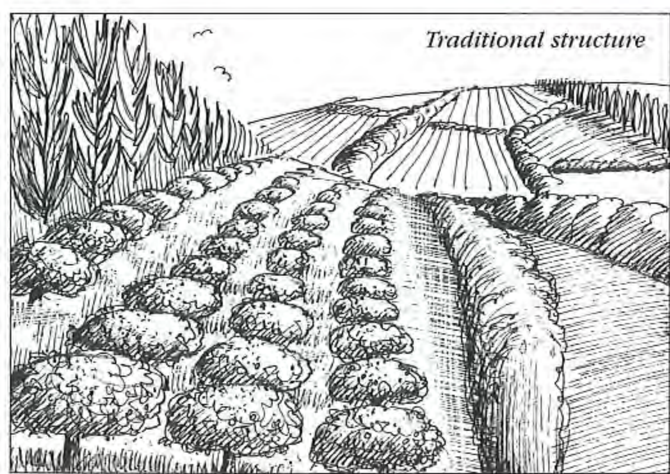
County Visuals - KCC

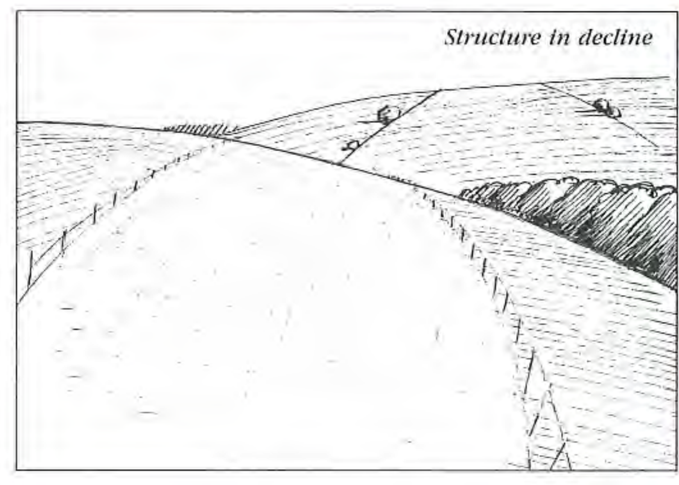


Cranbrook

In contrast with Goudhurst, Cranbrook's distinction lies in its predominance of white weatherboarded houses which dominate the centre of the town, whilst at the end of the High Street the magnificent white windmill towers up above the buildings. The vernacular charm of this town is such that it attracted a small clique of resident artists in the nineteenth century. ▶

County Visuals - KCC





▲ *Decline of landscape structure*

◀ *Existing patterned landscape in the Kentish High Weald*

Other pressures

Decline in hop-gardens
Suburbanisation (page 22)
Decline in landscape structure (pages 22-23)
Traffic pressure (pages 15 & 39)

Kent Fruit Belt.

In this intimate, densely settled area, small lanes twist through a seemingly endless maze of high hedges and tidy orchards. During the summer, when the fruit trees are in leaf, there is a sense of being submerged in this landscape. The valleys and ridges to the north-west, around Matfield and Brenchley, are small and gentle, rarely offering long views out, so that the occasional open fields between the orchards seem to provide a breathing space and a slight sense of relief.

Intensive fruit cultivation gives way to large arable fields along the Teise valley, between Lamberhurst and Horsmonden. These fields are backed by extensive tracts of mixed woodland, in which a certain amount of coppicing takes place. The fairy-tale manor house of Scotney Castle lies hidden beside the River Bewl, which feeds into the Teise through a landscape of open, tree-lined pastures. Around Goudhurst and Spelmonden, regimented ranks of hop poles cast harsh shadows in the winter sunlight. In summer they disappear under a mass of coarse leaves and clinging tendrils, which snake out along the overhead wires to intertwine with each other.

The intensity of cultivation in this area has resulted in a thick scattering of houses along the lanes, from tile-hung cottage to twentieth century bungalow. Oasthouses and packing sheds serve as a reminder that this has always been, and remains, a working landscape. In spring, a closer look at the apparently timeless fields of apple-blossom, reveals that the flowers are emerging from trees festooned with the latest technology, where artificial 'spiders webs' are wrapped around the trees to prevent bird damage.

Sally Marsh

▲ *Hop poles in winter*

◀ *Bewl Water*

Bedgebury and Bewl

The upper tributaries of the River Bewl were dammed and flooded in 1975 thus creating the largest artificial area of water in the South-east. The steep ghylls, which are so characteristic of the High Weald, have become narrow bays and inlets, separated from each other by rolling arable ridges, edged with occasional hedgerow trees and small deciduous woodlands.

To the north and east, expanses of coniferous forest rise up beyond the water's edge. Despite its scale, Bewl Water is surprisingly well hidden from the surrounding countryside. Lying in an elevated 'basin', between Wadhurst, Ticehurst and Lamberhurst, brief glimpses are occasionally possible from the enclosing ridges, but it is only at close quarters that its full scale can be appreciated.

This huge stretch of water catches the endless changes of light and weather which sweep across the Weald, reflecting steel-grey clouds and vivid orange sunsets. There is room here for sailing dinghies to flicker over the waves without disrupting the solitude of fishermen and bird-watchers, whilst in

▲ *Near Four Wents*

Cranbrook

The characteristic charm of this area is in the jumble of little lanes and strips of coppice woodland, interspersed with roughly grazed meadows and small orchards. Many of the fields in the south and west are fringed by overgrown hedges, whose branches are laden in the spring with white may-blossom, whilst clumps of cow parsley lean out of the verges into the roads. In the east, towards Rolvenden, extensive views south over the Rother valley open up, whilst to the north the land becomes flatter and the horizon is confined by the dense sweep of Hemsted Forest. There are extensive arable fields here with occasional hedgerow trees, whilst the skyline is dominated near Rolvenden by West Cross windmill.

Although there are some elegant areas of parkland, such as Hole Park, near Benenden, and a considerable number of pony paddocks, this area nevertheless retains a strong agricultural tradition. Hops are still grown here and there are large orchards where in winter, twisted black-barked apple-trees crouch over the land like enormous spiders. Between these orchards, warehouses and occasional conifer windbreaks dispel any illusions that this is a purely ornamental landscape.

summer the wide, glittering views provide a retreat for those who simply wish to sit and contemplate.

The mixed woodlands to the north-east of Bewl Water wrap round the Flimwell ridge to Bedgebury Forest. Straddling the watershed between the Teise and the Rother, this vast conifer plantation is interspersed, as so often in the High Weald, with feathery veins of birch, which flush to a delicate green in spring. Despite the roar of traffic on the main roads between Cranbrook, Hawkhurst, Flimwell and Lamberhurst, this is a peaceful area, where the sheer scale of water and forest is able to contain the intrusion of these roads within the landscape.

Bedgebury Forest ▶

Hops and Orchards

Hops

Hops have been cultivated in the High Weald since the sixteenth century. 'Hopped ale' or beer was popular before this time on the Continent, both for its taste and superior keeping quality when compared with ordinary ale. It was being brewed in England in the fifteenth century using imported hops. Within a hundred years, however, hop gardens were established in the High Weald and were soon supplying the London markets. As the trade flourished, so did the building of oasthouses to dry the hops, although most of those that exist today date from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Unfortunately a combination of factors, including the increase in imported hops and beers, has led to a dramatic decline in their cultivation over the last century. Although white-cowled oasthouses still grace many farms, most have been converted into houses, whilst new low-growing hop varieties threaten to change the appearance of the remaining hop gardens still further. With this decline in cultivation, have gone too the gatherings of itinerant hop-pickers, whose seasonal camps used to enliven this landscape.

Orchards

Cultivation of orchard fruit did not become widely practised in the High Weald until the sixteenth century. Gradually apples, pears and plums were increasingly planted, but the establishment of the commercial orchard occurred only slowly. Nevertheless, large areas of the Kentish High Weald were producing fruit by the nineteenth century and there was a huge increase in the scale of production around the turn of the century. The perceived mass demand for cheap, identical apples and pears, however, has contributed to the decline in locally produced fruit over the last fifty years and the effects of this can be seen throughout the AONB. Where extensive orchards once cloaked the upper slopes of many Wealden valleys, today only a few tall, shelterbelt hedges may remain to mark out their former sites. The traditional tall, spreading apple trees undergrazed by sheep are also a thing of the past, as modern growers favour trees grafted onto dwarf root-stock. Since 1961 the total area of orchard in the High Weald has reduced by over one third and the trend is continuing. The further decline of these features, which produce such intricate patterns across the landscape as well as valued local employment, would be a great loss to the character of the AONB.

County Visuals - Kent County Council

▲ *Apple orchard in Kent*

◀ *Hop garden in Summer*

Upper Rother Valley

Landscape description

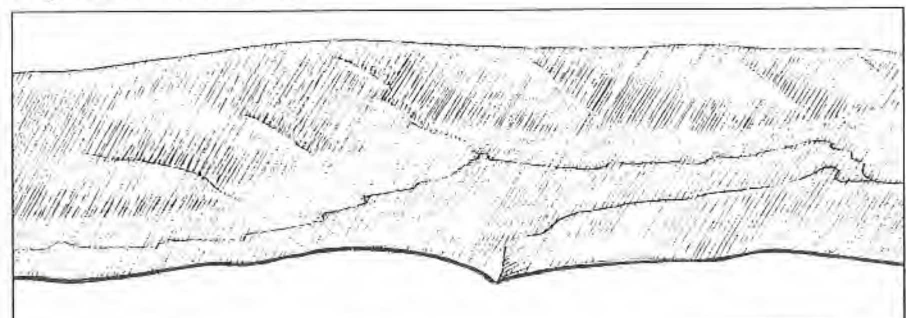
The Upper Rother Valley lies in the heart of the High Weald, between the two major ridges of the AONB, and covers the land between Mayfield and Robertsbridge, including the Dudwell Valley.

This landscape is dominated by the broad valley of the River Rother, whose tributaries start high up in the hidden ghylls around Mayfield and Rotherfield. Nowadays the valley is remote and peaceful, a mosaic of field, hedge and woodland, but five hundred years ago this was an industrial area, echoing with the thump and boom of the iron forges, belching smoke over the countryside.

Before the Norman Conquest, this area was predominantly used for summer grazing by coastal landowners and there are still local names here ending in 'sell' (meaning animal shelters or herdsmans huts) which record this, such as Houndsell and Boarzell.

Gradually these seasonal settlements became permanent and by the early Middle Ages, ridge-top towns such as Mayfield were well-established. Only the southern ridges, from Heathfield south to Battle or east to Etchingham, remained as untamed heath or common. Eventually, the peasants who traditionally squatted on these ridge-top commons, were granted 'official' plots by landowners. This led to the string of villages, such as Punnetts Town, which did not grow up around an existing church, and whose main focus, therefore, was the inn or shop. Only later did the little non-conformist chapels, which still exist today, arrive. Even now, these villages seem to retain an

Key Characteristics



Landform

In the west, the Rother's tributaries flow down from steep-sided valleys of small fields and woodlands, to meet up on the flat flood-plain of the river below Stonegate. In the east, towards Robertsbridge, the valley widens out between gentle, more intensively farmed slopes.

◀

Narrow lanes with high hedges

Most of the small lanes which criss-cross this area are sunk between high hedges, often on roadside banks. Many are well-kept and regularly trimmed and in some areas they contain a high number of mature oaktrees. These tall hedges often confine the views across the countryside, giving the landscape a sense of intimacy and secrecy.

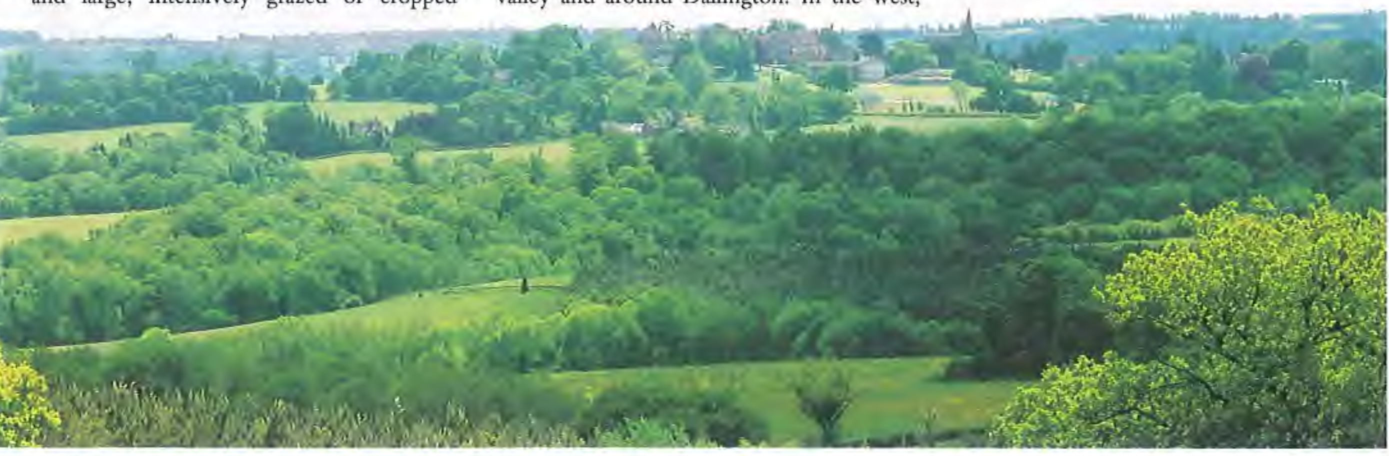
◀

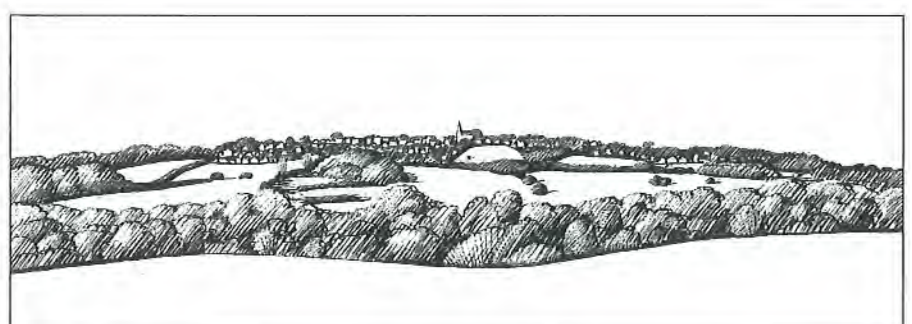
Follies

Unusual structures in the landscape are characteristic of the Upper Rother Valley. The Sugar-loaf at Woods Corner is only one example of several eighteenth century follies which dot the countryside between the river Dudwell and the Heathfield - Battle ridge. The high visibility and curiosity value of these features give the surrounding landscape a park-like quality, which is quite distinctive amongst the rolling farmland of this area. ▶

almost temporary feel.

Today the Upper Rother Valley includes huge stretches of deciduous and coniferous commercial woodland on the southern ridge and large, intensively grazed or cropped fields on the lower valley slopes, as the valley broadens out. The pattern of small mediaeval fields still remains on the steeper slopes, for example below Burwash in the Dudwell valley and around Dallington. In the west, the deep, intimate valleys between Heathfield and Wadhurst are a patchwork of small pastures, shaws and prosperous former farmhouses.

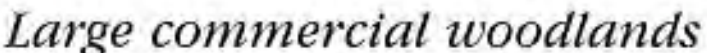




Ridge top settlements

Many of the villages in the Upper Rother Valley lie along the ridges. Some grew up around hill-top churches, perhaps choosing the higher ground to avoid the floods, whilst others were the result of unofficial wasteland settlements which gradually became permanent. These ridges and settlements are characteristic features and it is common to see a graceful church spire emerging from a well-wooded sky-line.

◀



Large commercial woodlands

Large stretches of mixed woodland cover the southern ridge between Heathfield and Mountfield. Many of these are commercial woods and it is a common sight to see gangs of workers coppicing and felling trees here during the winter. The dominance of worked woodland along these ridges gives a glimpse into the way many Wealden forests must once have looked, when timber was a fundamental part of the local economy. ▶

David Saunders

Pressures and change

Fragmentation of farm-holdings

Agriculture in the High Weald is undergoing considerable change. As farm incomes fall and farmers are encouraged to diversify, the appearance of the countryside also takes on a new form. Not only do new crops, such as the blue-flowered linseed, appear in the fields but new land-owners enter the farming community. In the Upper Rother Valley, as elsewhere in the AONB, there has been a significant increase in the number of part-time and 'hobby' farms.

Changes in land-ownership can often lead to changes in land-management, whether as a result of individual preferences for a particular type of farming or because the land is required for other uses, such as recreation or horsiculture.

The influx of non-agricultural wealth and the gradual fragmentation of the old farming communities can have both positive and negative effects on the landscape.

Positive

New land-owners, who do not buy the land to farm commercially, usually have stable incomes from other sources. This can provide the financial opportunity to carry out investment in the landscape, such as hedge-laying, which does not necessarily produce a monetary return. Whilst many farmers in the High Weald are equally keen to carry out similar activities, national farm incomes are currently half what they were, on average, between 1940 and 1977. New land-owners may also be keen to restore features in the landscape, such as hedgerow trees, either as part of the desire to establish possession and 'make one's mark' on the landscape, or from a positive attitude to the environment.

Layed hedge ▶

Negative

Where a particular form of management has been beneficial to the landscape or an individual habitat, any change in this can be very damaging. A change in ownership can often result in the loss of detailed local knowledge about existing habitats and suitable management. A simple change from running sheep on a pasture to grazing horses, for example, can destroy the delicate balance of the vegetation, resulting in loss of diversity.

Grazed pasture ▶

Traditional hay cutting ▲

Old hay meadow vegetation ▼

Habitat Loss

Old Hay Meadows

Approximately 95% of the unimproved, species-rich pasture in lowland Britain has been lost since 1945. Within the Upper Rother Valley there are only known to be eight sites, where these old pastures and hay-meadows remain. The rich flora in these fields can include Dyers greenweed (*Genista tinctoria*), Yellow rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*), Fairy flax (*Linum catharticum*) and Green-winged orchid (*Orchis morio*). The usual form of maintainance for these meadows is a combination of cutting for hay once a year, after the flowering season, and grazing by sheep or cattle. Unfortunately this habitat faces severe pressures, including : -

1. Change in management, or intensity of management, through lack of awareness. Sometimes fields are 'left to nature' in the mistaken belief that this is good for conservation, or planted up with trees.

2. Development pressure, causing total or partial habitat destruction.

3. Drift from herbicides or fertilisers on neighbouring fields.

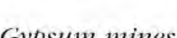
Considerable areas of species-rich grassland are also preserved along road verges. If these roads are widened or re-routed, these important habitats can be lost.

Flowers in roadside verge ▶

Special Features

Batemans

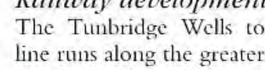
This was the home of Rudyard Kipling for thirty years until his death in 1936. Lying deep in the Dudwell valley, below Burwash, it is a typical seventeenth century Sussex manor, built at the time when many of the ironmasters were amassing their fortunes. The local honey-coloured sandstone from which it was built, contrasts with the dark oak pannelling inside, made from local timber. Kipling was enchanted with Batemans and the Sussex landscape in which he lived, and it became both the inspiration and the setting for some of his best-loved childrens stories. ▶



Gypsum mines

Gypsum has been mined in the woodlands around Mountfield since 1874, but, despite the extent of the mines, little is visible from any distance. This industry has created a strange, eerie landscape, where huge steel conveyor tubes rise up into the tree-tops above the road, descending almost immediately to be lost again in the trees. British Gypsum are a major employer in this area and one of the few heavy industries in the High Weald. ▶

Matthew Thomas



Railway development

The Tunbridge Wells to Hastings railway line runs along the greater part of the Upper Rother Valley. Although the railway line itself is relatively unintrusive, it may encourage small industries and businesses to set up where there is a convenient station. Whilst this is an important part of the economy of the AONB, it can have considerable landscape impacts. At Etchingham, the flat valley bottom emphasises the warehouses and small industrial developments which have grown up in this area.

Other Pressures

Suburbanisation (page 22)
Decline in landscape structure (pages 22-23)

Upper Rother Valley

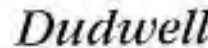
Rother

This is a landscape of contrasts. Looking east, from the Heathfield to Mark Cross ridge, the Rother valley stretches far across the Weald, a long, open vista of wooded slopes, punctuated by occasional fields. Immediately below this western ridge, however, thick woodlands conceal an intimate landscape of small ghylls, carved out by the streams which feed into the Rother. These ghylls are often too steep to ever have been cleared for cultivation, so that the strips of woodland still found on their slopes may be the remains of the original *Andredswald*. These secretive, hidden valleys conceal a well-kept landscape, whose farms are set back from the roads, whilst smaller cottages straggle along sunken lanes behind dense hedges. Some areas, for example at Tidebrook and north of Broad Oak, retain their largely mediaeval field patterns, although in other areas, for example west of Markly Wood, they have been lost through hedge removal.

Below Witherenden Bridge, the maze of small ridges and ghylls resolves itself into the open river valley which stretches down to Etchingham. This landscape has a stronger agricultural feel, with fewer houses behind laurel hedges. The field patterns along the sides of the valley are strongly delineated by shaws and hedgerows, often punctuated by mature oaks. Standing on one of the several bridges over the river, the valley has an exposed feel, its flatness enhanced by the trimmed hedges which cross the narrow floodplain. In winter, the Rother regularly floods these fields, turning the valley bottom into a huge sheet of water within hours.

North of Etchingham the secluded, rolling Limden valley, supports rich colonies of wild flowers along the road-sides. Here, as elsewhere in the Upper Rother, the gentle shaws and pastures hide the remains of a thriving iron industry and abandoned hammer pond 'bays' or dams, such as those at Wedds Farm, can still be traced all the way up the valley.

Ian Graham



Dudwell

The river Dudwell runs through one of the prettiest valleys in the Upper Rother. Enclosed by the Burwash ridge and the forests of Dallington and Darwell, it still contains remnants of mediaeval field patterns. In the west there are extensive coniferous and deciduous woodlands and a patchwork of fields and shaws. The valley slopes below Burwash have a strong pattern of rectangular fields but to the east there are some dominant rows of alder, willow and poplar, especially along the sides of the Dudwell. Distinctive lines of Scots Pines dot the valley and stand out along the ridgetops. Despite the influx of visitors to Bateman's at Burwash, the valley retains a peaceful, secluded feel.

Darwell

This is one of the most densely wooded areas in the High Weald. There is a sense of endless forest, and the height of the ridge allows magnificent views, both north over the Rother valley and south to the coast. The villages situated in this area are either hidden within the forests or strung out along the ridge-tops, as if washed up above the tide-line of trees.

These forests are a mixture of conifers and broadleaved coppice, much of which is sweet chestnut. Many of the products are used locally for fencing or firewood or go to pulp mills. This is one of the few places in the country where coppiced woodland is a considerable source of local employment. In the spring, the varied ages of the woodlands allow wild flowers to flourish amongst the coppice stools and it is not unusual to see sheets of white wood anemones spreading deep into the woods in spring.

This is a landscape of surprises, whose peculiarities are only gradually revealed within the veils of woodland. 'Mad Jack' Fuller's Brightling follies, including a churchyard pyramid and a sixty-five foot high obelisk, are discovered unexpectedly, sited not in a single park but across a whole parish. Equally unforeseen are the sudden lengths of steel tubing, which snake along the forest floor or loop up over the lanes, connecting the widely-dispersed gypsum mines. And glittering in secret in Darwell Wood is the Darwell Reservoir, all but hidden amongst the trees.

The Heathfield to Battle ridge offers a remarkable view of the High Weald. To the north, the rolling woodlands of the central valleys stretch far into the distance, redolent of the descriptions of the old untamed *Andredsweald*. To the south, the gentle fields and shaws of the lower slopes of the High Weald feed gradually down into the flatter fields of the Low Weald, backed by the silhouette of the distant South Downs.

Architecture

Although there are moments of architectural elegance in the High Weald - the seventeenth century brick-built manor of Groombridge Place; the huge Victorian viaduct over the river Ouse near Ardingly - it is not in these occasional gems that the High Weald glories. It is the cottages and farmhouses, the small parish churches and the barns, where elegance is sacrificed for unevenness; straight lines for crooked; regular facades for lopsided. The High Weald has been blessed with a wealth of plentiful building materials - sandstones, timber, clay, even reeds - and from these a rich array of textures and styles has developed, whose unpretentious forms seem to have grown out of the land and not to have been imposed upon it.

Most domestic buildings before the seventeenth century were timber-framed, often clad with locally-made red tiles or white painted planks, to protect against the weather. These buildings have sometimes settled over the years, causing the roofs and walls to warp to an alarming degree. Many have been gradually extended, so that the traditional 'rambling' rose-clad farmhouse, beloved by Victorian painters, is a reality all over the High Weald. Although roofing materials historically included both thatch and stone, red tiles are now almost universal. The local sandstones have also been widely used, especially for churches and manor-houses but also in combination with timber-framing, particularly during the nineteenth century, to produce decorative estate buildings.

Sadly, the rich palette of local materials and styles has been both neglected and mis-used in recent years. Many new housing developments pay only lip-service towards the character of the High Weald. Thus if weatherboarding was traditionally used to protect the upper timbers of a house from rain, it becomes a nonsense to see it used on the lower half of a modern brick building. A well-meant intention to fit in with local style can sometimes descend into mockery through misunderstanding of the style being followed.

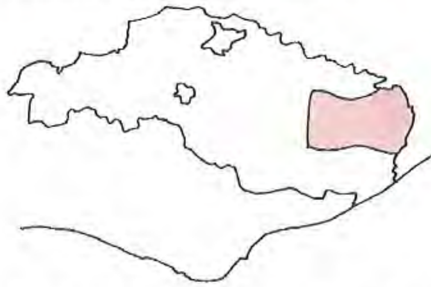
Rebecca Warren

▲ *Pembury Old Church*

◀ *West Hoathly*

Lower Rother Valley

Landscape description.

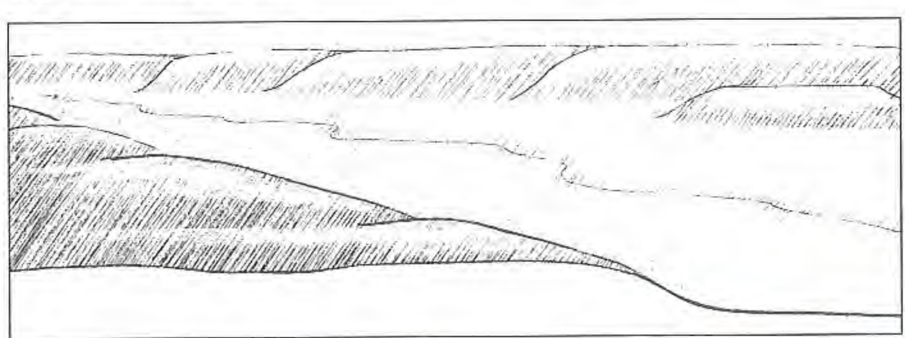


The Lower Rother Valley runs east from Robertsbridge to Rye, stretching as far north as Tenterden and as far south as Peasmarsh. The Rother was one of the most important rivers in the High Weald, and still dominates the eastern end of the AONB.

This area has historically been subject to alternate flooding and silting and the river has changed its course several times over the centuries. During the Roman occupation, tidal estuary and mud-flats extended far up the valley and the Isle of Oxney was a true island. The ancient sea-cliffs at Rye, Playden and Oxney are a constant reminder that here, as in Brede, the shape and role of this landscape has changed dramatically over time. The river levels are drained by a network of small ditches and flecked by patches of scrub and stunted trees. Although the Brede and Rother valley floors contain most of the best agricultural land in the AONB, the intensively farmed, arable fields are still interspersed with considerable areas of sheep-grazed pasture. The gentle, open slopes which rise up onto the enclosing ridges, support a network of large, regular fields, surrounded either by overgrown hedgerows or closely trimmed, gappy hedges and sporadic trees. Both the river levels and the valley slopes have a bleak, wind-swept feel, despite the intensive agriculture.

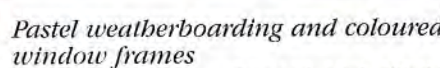
Further west, around Bodiam and Sandhurst, the valleys close in. Despite the large fields, there are more small woodlands and thicker hedges, although

Key characteristics

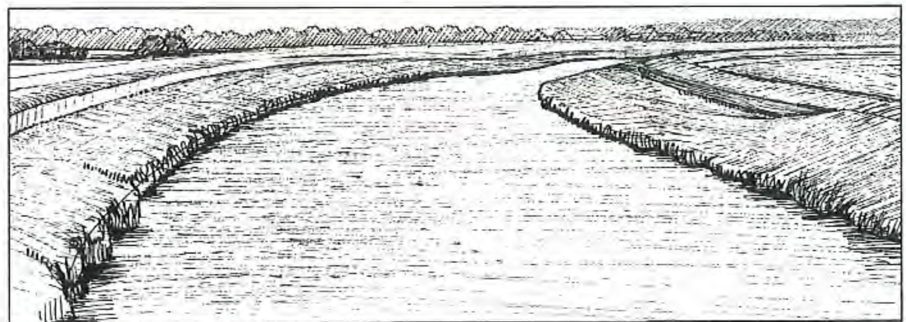


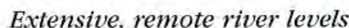
Landform
The Lower Rother Valley is a wide, flat-bottomed valley, whose rolling valley slopes are drained by small ghylls. At the mouth of the valley, where it opens onto Walland Marsh in the east, the Isle of Oxney forms a gentle mound on the flat levels, around which the River Rother and the Reading Sewer flow.
◀

Reed-filled ditches
A network of ditches and 'channels' drain the flood-plains of the Lower Rother Valley. The river and larger channels, such as the Otter Channel, are hidden behind raised grassy flood-banks, whilst the smaller ditches are almost invisible from a distance. Many of these watercourses support dense beds of common reed, whose dry yellow stems rattle and hiss in the winter winds.
◀

Pastel weatherboarding and coloured window frames

The stark whiteness of typical High Weald weatherboarding is often replaced here by a variety of pastel shades, especially in the villages. In contrast, many of the window frames are painted in dark colours, giving an almost jaunty, sea-side feel.
◀

many are unmanaged and in decline. The terracotta-coloured soils of the Hexden valley still support occasional orchards and most of the red-brick or timber-framed farms have a pair of redundant oasthouses. In the villages, such as Northiam and Sandhurst, weatherboarding is common, whilst very occasionally a thatched cottage can still be found, a reminder of the days when reeds from the river-levels were a valued roofing material.





Extensive, remote river levels

The River Rother and the channels which feed into it, such as the Newmill Channel, have created an area of extensive, flat floodplains, dissected by smaller ditches. The unkempt bushes and patches of scrub, which dot the field edges, add to the wild, bleak atmosphere of the levels. The wide open spaces and long views are a fundamental part of the character of this area.

◀

Hedgerow trees

The open aspect of the large, regular fields on the valley slopes gives particular emphasis to the sporadic hedgerow trees. Most of these trees are mature oaks, often in uneven groups or clusters. Near Bodiam, rows of slender, regularly spaced poplars echo those of the Brede and Tillingham valleys. On the valley floor, especially in the west, occasional gnarled willows break up the monotony of the floodplains. ▶

Large fields

Extensive loss of hedgerows has occurred on the lower valley slopes, especially in the western end of the area, producing an open landscape dominated by large fields. Many of these fields have heavily trimmed or remnant hedges, which results in a stark, intensively farmed appearance.

◀

Lower Rother Valley

Pressures and change

Tourism ▲

The wealth of existing tourist attractions bring considerable numbers of visitors to the HighWeald. The trend in agricultural policy towards diversification is also encouraging tourist-based initiatives, such as farm-trails and nurseries. In the Lower Rother, Bodiam is a typical example. Within one small village there is a National Trust-owned castle, a steam railway, a farm-based 'rural experience', boat trips, pubs and several tea-shops. These attractions draw large numbers of people into the village, imposing considerable pressure on the network of tiny lanes and requiring extensive parking facilities. As demand outstrips the ability of the infrastructure to cope with it, there is increasing danger that the rural, unspoilt character of this countryside and its villages will be sacrificed for widened roads, white lines and car-parks.

Special features

Sally Marsh

County Visuals - KCC

Straightened riverbanks ▲

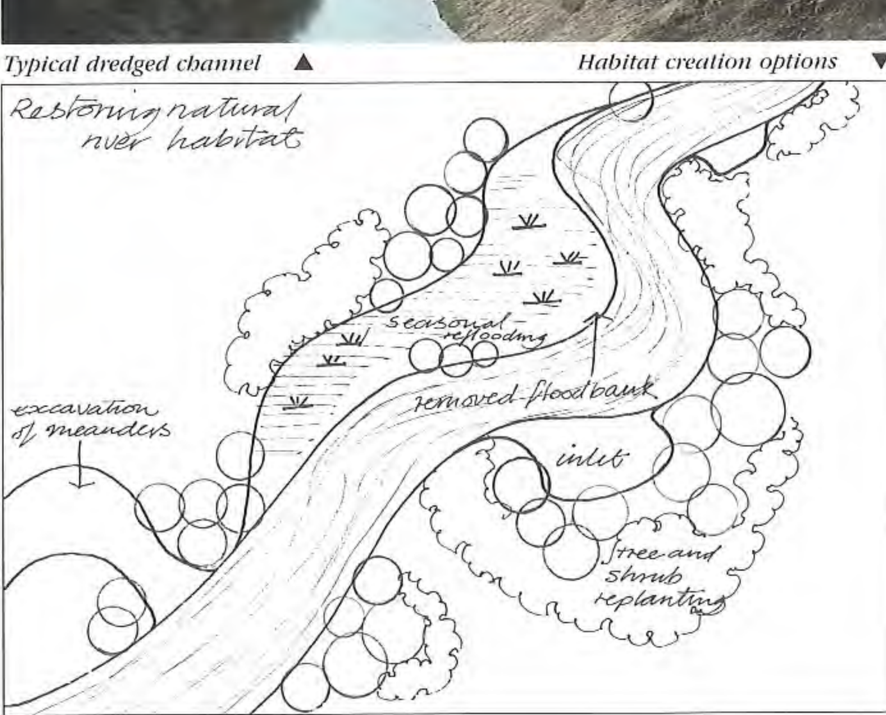
The changing face of the river valleys

River valleys are rarely static landscapes and the Lower Rother Valley has changed considerably over the years. Its present character derives largely from the agricultural improvement measures which occurred during the 1940s when the levels were comprehensively drained to allow arable cropping. The river itself was straightened in the 1960s. Most of the bankside trees and vegetation were removed and long sections of floodbank were constructed. Today these

Ian Graham

Typical dredged channel ▲

Habitat creation options ▼



Ecology

The river levels and marshland in this area provide a rich wildlife habitat. Historically the levels were pasture, which flooded seasonally, whilst there were more ditches supporting a wider range of species. Today fewer ditches support fewer species, and most of the wet pastures have been drained and ploughed up or reseeded.

Nevertheless the levels are still an important wetland habitat, whose particular value lies in the combination of plants and animals which depend on each other. Appropriate management techniques, such as reduced frequency of dredging and raised water levels, could return most of these ditches to their former richness within a short space of time.

Birds, in particular, respond very quickly to appropriate management techniques. The option of long term set-aside agreements could offer considerable opportunities for returning parts of the river levels to areas of high nature conservation value.

◀ *Wetland wildlife*

Remoteness ▲

Nowhere in the High Weald can be described as wilderness, but there are considerable areas where the landscape has remained relatively unspoilt by intrusive modern development and noticeable human activity. Typical intrusive developments and activities include urban centres or areas of ribbon development; warehouses and extensive modern agricultural complexes; formal recreation areas, such as golf courses or tourist attractions; busy roads. Although there are no natural landscapes within the AONB, it is the predominance of 'unspoilt' countryside which justifies its designation and produces the 'traditional' rural character for which it is valued. Changes in modern farming may reduce the amount of marginal land in commercial agriculture and increase the number of long-term set-aside agreements. This could offer major opportunities to enhance and increase the remote, unspoilt nature of these areas.

floodbanks and the open aspect of the valley are the dominant features on the levels.

Increasing concern over nature conservation and the quality of the environment, coupled with considerable changes within the agricultural industry, are pointing towards possibilities for restoration of a more 'natural' river habitat. Such possibilities include : -

Seasonal reflooding - Allowing seasonal reflooding of parts of the river system. This could include removal of sections of flood-bank and re-excavation of some smaller ditches.

Excavation of meanders - Re-excavation of meanders that were filled in when the river was canalised. Partly re-connecting these meanders to the existing river would create lengths of undisturbed water forming potentially rich wetland habitats.

Creation of inlets - Selective dredging and excavation can create undisturbed inlets to increase the length of river-bank. The water margin provides the richest river habitat.

Re-planting - Annual dredging and removal of bankside vegetation has created a very bare riverside habitat. Reduction of dredging operations and selective replanting of trees and shrubs could re-introduce variety and interest to the river landscape.

Windswept valley bottom in winter ▲

In contrast to the rest of the High Weald, hedges and woodlands are not part of the character of the river-level landscape. Along the lower valley slopes, some rows of poplar are visually distinctive, but elsewhere the patches of scrub and willow have a temporary, unplanned feel.

In the Lower Rother Valley these patches of scrub, more numerous than in the Brede, enhance the desolate, windswept nature of the valley. New tree planting in the river valleys is therefore a sensitive issue. Although the strong lines of poplars actually emphasise the flatness of the valley bottoms, major new tree planting would diminish the open, uncluttered aspect and reduce the extent of the views, thus changing the character of the valley. Nevertheless limited, sporadic tree planting along the riverside, of appropriate species, such as willow, poplar and alder, could enhance the river landscape without compromising the open, unconfined nature of the landscape.

Other pressures

Decline in landscape structure (pages 22-23)

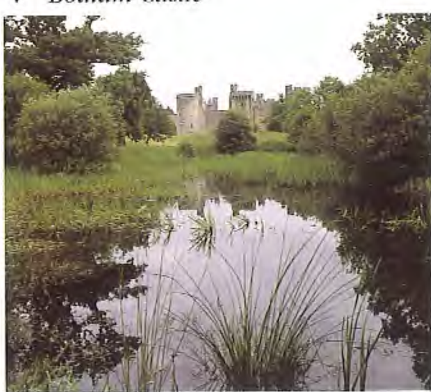
Lower Rother Valley

Bodiam

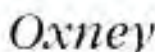
Few castles can be more outwardly perfect than Bodiam. Sitting solidly on the northern bank of the Rother, halfway between Robertsbridge and Newenden, it still dominates the river valley, as it has for the last six hundred years. The castle marks the point where the Rother valley begins to lose its wild, marshy appearance and is gradually enclosed by increasingly wooded ridges. Narrow lanes wander across the upper slopes between high hedges and unmanaged shaws and the intimate topography of the High Weald begins to re-assert itself.

▲ *Floods at Salehurst*

▼ *Bodiam Castle*



Nevertheless, this is still a large-scale landscape, where big arable fields are surrounded by overgrown hedges and wide views open out from the ridges. Despite the network of drainage ditches, extensive flooding can occur during the winter, and the valley-floor becomes a great sheet of brown water, reflecting the bleak, grey skies overhead. There is a thicker scattering of trees and scrub on this flood-plain, than in the valleys of the Brede, which reduces the open aspect of the landscape. The hop gardens and orchards, however, with their distinctive shelter-belt hedges, have declined. Once they were a major feature of the area. This leaves a landscape which lacks the cohesion of the smaller-scale farmland of the High Weald, without taking on the great open horizons of the lower river levels.



Oxney

The final retreat of the sea, and the gradual draining of the resultant mud-flats, has left a distinctive landscape here. The flat Rother levels contrast strongly with the ancient cliffs, which rear up from the edge of the flood-plain, whilst the Isle of Oxney seems almost to float above the smooth green levels which surround it. The valley bottom is punctuated by gnarled willows and thorns, and the scrubby bushes which cling to the edges of the fields give a wild, remote feel to the area. There is an almost unkempt appearance to this valley, re-inforced by the remnant hedges, the leaning post and wire fences and the reed-filled ditches which divide the fields from each other. In winter, these elements combine to produce a bleak, untamed landscape, intensified by the bitter winds and sometimes horizontal rain, which can lash across the valley. The lack of a coherent structure to the landscape, provided elsewhere in the High Weald by the strong network of hedge and shaw, extends across the lower slopes of the valley and the Isle of Oxney, only gradually re-asserting itself around Northiam, Ewhurst Green and Wittersham. Oxney itself seems to remain an island, isolated by the farmland which now surrounds it, instead of sea. It is a strange patchwork of tiny landscapes, where neglected pastures and overgrown hedges in the west contrast with large arable fields, edged by post and wire in the north. The dense hedgerows and brick and tile houses, typical of the rest of the AONB, are in evidence around Wittersham, whilst a few small orchards still pattern the gentle slopes. From the edges of the 'island', long views open out across the levels to the ridges beyond.

▲ *The 'Isle' of Oxney*

Historic Coastline

Channel sailors, making for the ports of Rye and Winchelsea in the fourteenth century, navigated around a very different shore from the one that exists today. The history of this coastline is one of continual loss and gain. 12 000 years ago this small corner of England extended only as far as the now land-locked cliffs, which can still be seen around Winchelsea and Pett. Over the next 6-8000 years, however, the land gradually subsided to sea-level and extensive silting occurred across what is now Romney Marsh, whilst great channels extended deep inland. About 4000 BC the land slowly rose again, supporting dense oak forest and moorland. The remains of this forest are still preserved in the peat underlying Pett Level. After 2-3000 years, however, the land once more began to sink and the sea flooded back in. At the same time, silt from the rivers accumulated over the drowning forest and the area became marshland. Around 1500BC the area lifted again and the marsh began to dry out. Shingle was deposited along the shoreline. When the Romans reached Britain, however, the land was yet again sinking and much of the marsh was tidal estuary. By this time, men were draining the land and the rivers were again silting up the marshes. In the Middle Ages a series of bad storms battered across the area, sweeping away towns such as Old Winchelsea. As men erected artificial sea-defences, shingle continued to be deposited along the shore, gradually pushing the sea back from former ports such as New Romney. By the middle of the seventeenth century the marsh was fully reclaimed and similar in outline to today.

Traces of this extraordinary history can be seen in the modern landscape. The ancient cliffs,which have formed a constant backdrop to the changing marshland, are still recognisable despite centuries of erosion. Preserved tree-trunks from the Forest Uplift are occasionally found washed out of the soils of Pett Level, whilst shingle is still accumulating along the existing shoreline. The constant battle between water and land is also revealed by the place-names; the suffix 'eye' found for example in Oxney and Rye, means 'island'. Unlike the wooded parts of the High Weald, this is a landscape which has changed almost beyond recognition over the last thousand years. Indeed even today there are signs that the land is sinking yet again.

▲ *Coastline at Pett*

◀ *Ancient landlocked cliffs*

Brede

Landscape description

Brede covers the area north of Hastings, from Battle to Rye, including the Fairlight cliffs and extending north to Peasmarsh and Northiam. The river-valleys of the Brede, Tillingham and Pannel Sewer form one of the most beautiful and dramatic landscapes in the High Weald. The great sweeping flood-plains of these rivers, which open out into the bleak expanses of Walland Marsh in the east, push deep into the heart of the High Weald in the west, becoming gradually enclosed by wooded valley slopes.

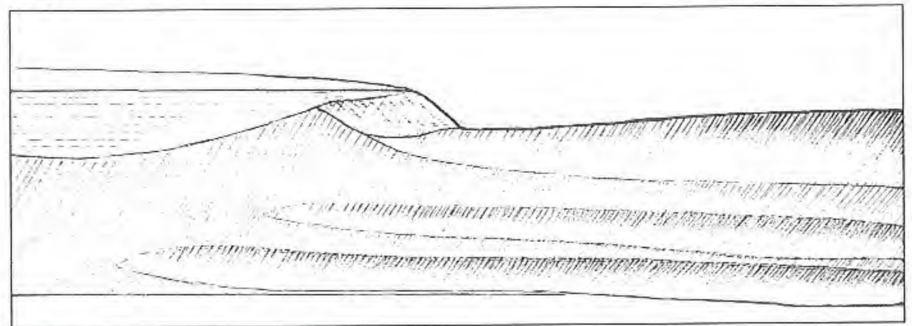
The magnificence of these valleys is emphasised by the extraordinary ancient cliffs which rear up along what was once the edge of the coast, around Rye, Winchelsea and Pett. In Roman times much of what we now know as the Brede and Pett levels was tidal estuary and mudflats. The gradual silting up of these estuaries and the drainage of the levels which followed has resulted in the flat, agricultural land and ditches, which now characterise this area.

Preserved timber from the prehistoric forests which once covered this area can still be seen on the beach at Pett.

At Fairlight, the sandstone hills, which have dominated the rest of the AONB, are fissured by steep, scrubby ghylls and are gradually crumbling unceremoniously into the sea. The resulting pink sand is streaked with clay.

Away from the immediate influence of the sea, an arc of patchworked ridge and valley landscape encloses the river valleys,

Key Characteristics



Landform

This is an area of flat-bottomed, intensively farmed river valleys, running east to west, whose rivers meet at Rye before flowing out of the AONB to the sea. These valleys are separated by a series of narrow, whalebacked ridges. Around the south and west edges of these valleys the land is steeply undulating, until at Fairlight, it finally plunges into the sea in a tumble of sandstone cliffs.

◄

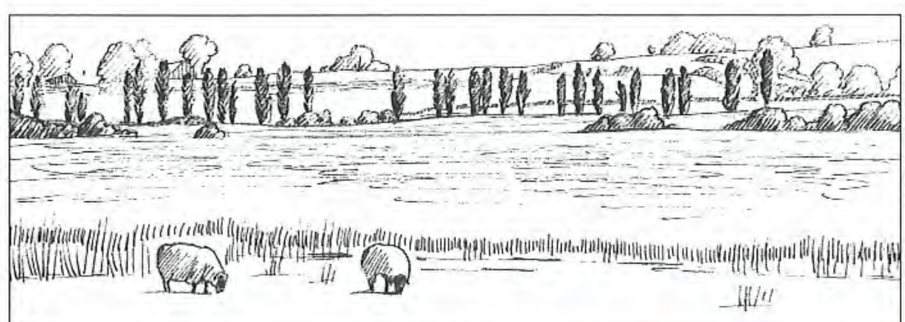
Valerie Alford

Remoteness

The river-levels around Rye, Winchelsea and Pett are remarkable expanses of open farmland, with almost no roads or houses. The tufts of scrubby thorn and occasional twisted willows which cling to the wind-blown marshes, give a desolate, wild feel to this area. Although this is a largely man-made landscape, it has a sense of remoteness and isolation probably matched only within the Weald by Ashdown Forest.

◄

running from Rye Foreign, west to Whatlington, then swinging back east to Guestling. Here the emphasis is on overgrown hedges and hedgerow trees, surrounding large, intensively farmed fields and extensive blocks of mixed woodland. On the steeper slopes near Hastings and Battle, smaller fields and a predominance of pasture give the landscape a less intensively farmed feel, interspersed by the subtle influence of the pony paddocks and barbed wire of the urban edge.



Poplars in valleys

The great, open expanses of the Brede and Tillingham valleys, which drain east out of the High Weald, are interrupted by occasional stately rows of Lombardy poplars on the lower valley slopes. These tall, thin trees reach up in startling contrast to the flat, horizontal landscapes of the flood-plains and occur nowhere else in the AONB in such a dramatic setting.

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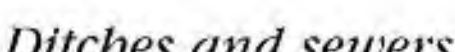

Ditches and sewers

The river-levels and marshes are criss-crossed by ditches or 'sewers', which are used to drain and regulate the water level on the flood-plains. Although many of the smaller sewers have been filled in, the network is a fundamental part of this open landscape, making fences and hedges unnecessary. Many of these ditches can only be picked out from a distance by the fringes of feathery reeds, which grow along their banks.

◄

Rebecca Warren

Pastel weatherboarding

Some of the buildings in this area are protected by coloured weatherboarding, often in cream or other pale colours. The window frames are usually painted in contrasting colours, such as black or dark blue. This tradition diverges from most of the rest of the High Weald, where both walls and window-frames are usually white.

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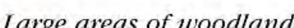


Large areas of woodland

There are extensive tracts of mixed woodland along the upper slopes of this area. Between Hastings and Battle, around Cripps Corner, and along the Peasmarsh ridge, swathes of coppice and conifers seem to enclose the valleys, forming a dense wooded backdrop. Many of the coppiced woodlands are still actively managed and the last commercial charcoal burning enterprise in the High Weald can be seen near Battle. ►

Pressures and change

Threats to the Valley Landscape

The river valleys and levels are remarkable for their open, uncluttered landscapes, flat horizons and sense of isolation. In the 1800s they were predominantly rough grazing for sheep, partially drained by a myriad of small ditches. Occasional tiny shepherd's huts dotted the valley sides above the flood-plains, and some of the upper slopes supported orchards. Since that time, the water level across the valleys has been lowered to allow arable cultivation so that wide green pastures have often given way to a patchwork of root-crops, rape and cereal cultivation.

The particular quality, however, of these valleys lies in the great, uncomplicated vistas along the open flood-plains; the uninterrupted expanses of marshy grazing on the levels; the whispering rushes in the ditches and the opportunity to experience a sense of isolation, where the peace is undisturbed, except for the occasional train on the local railway.

The specific threats in this landscape are to:-

The ditches ▲

The lowering of the water table and the leaching of fertilisers or pesticides from the fields, has damaged the ecological diversity of the ditches. Although drainage is no longer a worsening problem, intensive agriculture is continuing to alter the water quality, resulting in damage to the wildlife habitat as a whole.

The poplars

Some of the rows of poplars have been removed. Although they are an alien tree-species to this landscape and are not appropriate in large numbers, they form a distinct feature in this area and an intrinsic part of its character. If these trees are lost, this particular character will change.

The isolation

The river-levels form a landscape of wide horizons and solitude. It is possible here to escape the noise and activity of urban life and to be swallowed up in the scale and space of this countryside. This experience is valuable not just to those who use the footpaths across the levels, but equally to those who simply absorb the peace from a viewpoint. Any development in this landscape would shatter this sense of isolation.

The emptiness

The river-levels are bleak and wind-swept. Hedges and trees, other than poplars, play little part in the flood-plain landscape, although patches of scrub help to disguise the railway line and lane crossing the Brede valley. Substantial new tree or hedge planting in these lower stretches of the rivers, however, would adversely affect the sense of emptiness and space, foreshortening the views along the valleys and taming the very bleakness for which they are valued.

The Ridge Landscape

The loss or decline of hedges, woodlands and ponds is evident in this area. Remnant hedges are being replaced by wire fencing, whilst many of the valley slopes have lost considerable lengths of hedge altogether. Despite this decline in hedgerow management, however, this area also shows positive initiatives in landscape restoration.

Neglected pond ▶

Valerie Alford

The Urban Edge Landscape ▶

The boundary of the AONB, where it skirts Hastings, is subject to considerable pressure from the expansion and visual intrusion of the town.

The particular problems associated with this area are : -

1. Holiday and recreation developments
2. Electricity pylons
3. Sheds, warehouses and storage yards
4. New roads
5. New housing developments
6. Cemeteries
7. Nurseries

All these factors contribute to the slow degradation of the rural integrity of the AONB. This results either from the influence they have on views and perceptions of the area or from the direct impact of the development itself.

The Coastal Landscape ▲

This fragile landscape is the only section of coastal sandstone cliff in Sussex. Fairlight Country Park forms a valuable break in urban development along the clifftops. Nevertheless, the popularity of the Sussex coast as a holiday resort has left a legacy of holiday developments and continues to attract pressure for the increase of such facilities. The threats to the Fairlight Coast result from:-

Intrusion of caravan parks

The sprawl of caravans and the accompanying facilities detract from the wild, bleak nature of the cliffs and their wooded ghylls, by suburbanising the landscape. In the wrong place such developments clash with the otherwise unspoilt nature of the area, degrading the visual quality of the AONB, even when actually sited along its boundary.

Recreation pressure in the Country Park

The steep gradients of the Country Park, and its thin turf, result in erosion of its footpaths and slopes. In addition, the pressure to accommodate parking and other tourist facilities, leads to further suburbanisation of the countryside around the cliff-tops.

Fragmentation of landscape structure

The farmland behind the Country Park, stretching down to Pett, has been fragmented by piecemeal removal and decay of structural elements in the landscape, such as hedges and hedgerow trees.

Other pressures

Decline in landscape structure (pages 22-23)

Brede

Upper Brede

The great open valleys of the Brede Levels are surrounded to the west and north by a gently undulating countryside, where large blocks of mixed woodland are interspersed with secretive little valleys. Overgrown hedgerows around hidden pastures contrast strongly with the tightly trimmed hedges and large arable fields of the lower valley slopes to the east. Single mature trees along the field edges blend with shaws and overgrown hedges to produce the typical High Weald impression of almost solid woodland. Small ponds, oozing soft black mud and enclosed by thickets of thorn and bramble, bring to mind the former presence of the iron industry, which flourished here. Between the woodlands, small pockets of orchard still linger and occasional oasthouses advertise the extent of former hop cultivation. Hops are not grown here now. This is a remote area where, despite the frequent outbursts of housing along many of the lanes, the dominant impression is still that of a rural, agricultural landscape, where large blocks of coppice woodland still cloak parts of the ridges.

Battle.

Hastings and Battle lie at the eastern end of the southern sandstone ridge, commanding good views over the High Weald and towards Pevensey Bay. It was here that William the Conqueror defeated King Harold in 1066, at what is now Battle. Nowadays the invasion is seasonal, from tourists and holiday-makers coming to enjoy the coast and countryside. Hastings has a considerable influence on this area. The heavily wooded nature of the ridge and the tiny valleys which dissect it, succeed in concealing some of this influence, but the presence of caravan parks, pylons and sheds along the boundary are gradually altering the essential bias of this landscape from agricultural to suburban. Along the main roads, large numbers of small nurseries and garden-produce stalls re-inforce this impression.

Beyond the urban edge, a patchwork of mixed agricultural land asserts itself. Large arable fields, often bordered by degenerating or unmanaged hedges, are interspersed with smaller pastures, edged in places with hedgerow trees. Small ghylls draining north and south form hidden pockets of unintensively grazed grassland or undisturbed woodland.

Around the southern edge of Battle, the landscape is a varied mix of small pony paddocks and larger arable fields, interspersed with a considerable number of houses. Towards Ashburnham, the houses thin out and the landscape takes on a predominantly agricultural feel.

Near Guestling ▶

▲ Upper Brede

Ian Graham

Brede levels

In Saxon times, much of what is now farmed river-levels, around Winchelsea and Rye, were coastal waters. The silting up of the rivers and the draining of the resultant levels gradually produced a flat, fertile expanse of farmland, flooded and redrained many times over the centuries. Between the valleys, long narrow ridges extend eastwards, their wide slopes still supporting considerable acreages of orchards and crowned by blocks of actively coppiced woodland. The influence of the valleys pervades even along these ridge-tops; from the roads, brief glimpses of

wide, hazy horizons appear frequently between woodland and hedgerow, the airy sense of space increasing as the ridges descend to the marsh. These long views, and their great expanses of uncluttered farmland, are fundamental to the character and beauty of this landscape, providing a setting for the historic hill-top settlements of Rye and Winchelsea. Looking down on to the valley floors, there is a stillness which is rare in the South-East today.

The special character of these valleys, however, results from detail as well as scale. The occasional short-eared owl can be seen swooping low over the river banks in day-light, whilst great flocks of lapwings wheel and dive over the fields around Winchelsea. The tranquillity of the Tillingham valley is disturbed in spring by the activities of the heronry on its upper slopes, and swans group elegantly beside the ditches near Rye. In winter, vast sea mists occasionally roll up the valleys in a billowing cloud, parted by dramatic land-locked cliffs and the silhouettes of Rye and Winchelsea.

The Tillingham Valley ▶

Winchelsea levels.

These river-levels form the western edge of the great expanse of flat land which becomes Romney Marsh. Much of this area is pasture, dotted with spikey green rushes and supporting flocks of sheep or young cattle. The initially unprepossessing appearance of these marshes belies a starkly beautiful landscape, where it is possible to escape the confines of hedge and woodland. Despite its exposed nature, this is a secretive land, whose fascination lies as much in what is hidden, as in what is revealed. Walking across the expanses of Pett Levels, a sudden splash in a nearby ditch gives away the presence of an invisible moorhen, whilst a loud burst of disembodied birdsong erupts from an apparently empty thicket of reeds..... From the high cliffs which enclose these levels, the scale of this landscape is deceptive. Only from within the marshes does it become real, as the narrow strips of feathery rushes seem to fragment, suddenly revealing an extra field or unseen sewer. Crossing the levels can be a disorientating experience, zig-zagging from bridge to bridge, hemmed in unexpectedly by waving fronds of rushes, splashing across watery depressions, whose long twisting shapes reveal them as the ghosts of filled-in ditches.....

▼ *Pett Level*

Fairlight Coast

At Fairlight, the sandstone hills of the High Weald surge off the end of England in an ungainly series of collapsed cliffs. Between Fairlight and the coast, the major southern ridge of the AONB forms a steeply undulating landscape of large open fields and occasional scrub-filled ghylls feeding down onto the cliff-tops. Towering over the countryside at 160m above sea-level, Fairlight church is one of the most distinctive landmarks in the High Weald and has been used by sailors to aid navigation since at least the sixteenth century. The cliff-tops themselves are a vibrant mix of bracken and gorse, between which wind-battered bluebells stud the rabbit-cropped turf in spring. From the small row of coastguards cottages at the back of the Country Park, the land falls steeply down to the cliff edge and it can be difficult to tell where the sea ends and the grey skies begin. This is an invigorating landscape, where the wind blows strongly off the water and the waves can be seen crashing onto the pink sand below. Beyond the crumbling cliffs, the bay sweeps round to Camber and Dungeness, a stark, elemental landscape of sand, shingle and weathered breakwaters, eroded into eerie shapes, like ancient wrecks exposed between the pebbles......

◀ *Fairlight Cliffs*

Working Woodlands

Walking through newly coppiced woodland in the depths of winter can be a distressing experience. Previously dense thickets of lush young trees have been cut to the ground, leaving exposed stumps and deep ruts across the woodland floor. The structure and 'sense of place' that the trees provided has been lost and the stacks of neatly split stakes seem like plunder, not harvest.

In fact, coppicing has been the traditional management of these woods since men first settled permanently here. It produces a rich and important wildlife habitat, encouraging the sheets of bluebells and wood anemones which are so characteristic of the High Weald.

The High Weald is one of the few areas in the country where deciduous woodland is still being commercially coppiced. Each time a coppiced tree is cut, the stump or stool, sends up a thicket of new young trunks. These trunks are cut on a regular cycle, usually every seven to twenty-five years, and the original stool can live for hundreds of years, if harvested in this way. This form of management provides a regular supply of similar-sized poles, which are used for a range of products, from bean-sticks to fence-posts, charcoal to wood-pulp. Larger timber, suitable for planking or beams, is supplied by standard trees, which grow between the coppices and are allowed to develop one trunk to maturity. Most deciduous trees can be coppiced, but the standards are usually oak.

In the High Weald, almost every deciduous woodland has been coppiced at some time. Indeed, wood was so valuable to our ancestors here, that even trees in the steepest ghylls and thickest hedges were harvested. Since the Second World War, however, new materials, cheaper imports and loss of available skilled labour on farms have combined to cause a dramatic drop in the market for coppiced timber.

If coppiced woodland is unmanaged, it gradually degenerates and falls over. Today, for the first time since perhaps the fourteenth century, large areas of High Weald woodland have reached this stage and landowners are now responding to this, with a revival in interest in coppice management. This interest, coupled with increased potential in coppiced wood for commercial and domestic fuel and for use in country crafts, could provide new markets for this timber and save coppicing both as a traditional form of management and as a vital means of conserving the wealth and variety of woods in the High Weald.

▲ *Making chestnut paling*

◀ *Coppice worker at Cross in Hand*

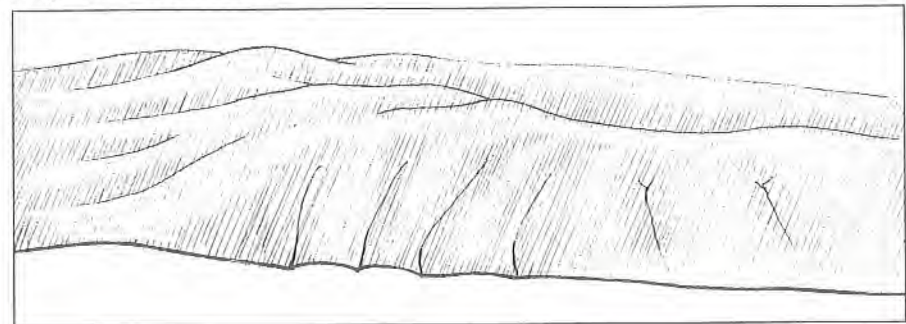
Southern Slopes

Landscape description

The Southern Slopes cover the south-western fringe of the AONB, between Crowborough and Catsfield, skirting the Upper Rother Valley and the Darwell ridge. This is an area of gentle valleys and slopes, feeding off the sandstone ridge onto the Low Weald, whose inherent charm lies in the intimate, enclosed nature of the landscape. Although fine views are available from the higher areas, the abundant vegetation and the maze of tiny lanes produce an intricate, tranquil environment. Small cottages peer out from behind dense hedges and little villages cluster round greens or churches, whilst numerous modern houses are scattered throughout the heavily wooded countryside around Heathfield and Cross in Hand. This contrasts with the more open, less densely settled landscape around Penhurst and Herstmonceux. It is a pretty, rural area, whose history can be traced amongst the pattern of fields and woods.

Iron was extensively dug and worked here, with a number of major furnaces and forges making use of the streams running off the ridge. The small, irregular pastures, still found on some of the hidden slopes around Hadlow Down and Rotherfield, are remnants of the old field pattern, created as the land was slowly settled in early mediaeval times. On the sandstone ridges between these farmed areas, however, considerable acreages of uncultivated wasteland remained until well into the eighteenth century. Their gradual enclosure by local landowners produced a pattern of larger,

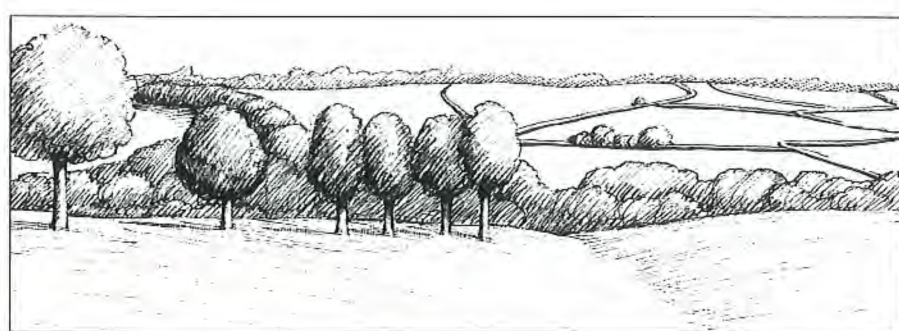
Key Characteristics

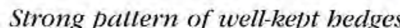


Landform:
This side of the major Heathfield to Battle ridge is dissected by a series of little ghylls and ridges draining south into the river Uck, the Cuckmere river and Waller's Haven. It is an intimate, enclosed landscape of small pastures, interspersed with a strong hedge pattern and small ghyll woodlands. There are frequent magnificent views towards the South Downs.
◀

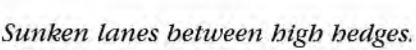
Southern views
The sandstone ridge between Heathfield and Battle offers long, expansive views across the Low Weald to the South Downs. Despite the confined nature of the immediate landscape, the Downs exert a constant presence in this area and are a means of orientation within the landscape. ▶

regular fields, often surrounded by specifically planted thorn hedging. Even today these hedges are still distinct from the older hedgerows, containing only a narrow range of plant species and frequently lacking hedgerow trees. This area is under increasing pressure from development. Former agricultural buildings have been converted to commercial uses. Although such diversification measures provide much needed local employment, they gradually alter the nature of the landscape by raising traffic levels on minor roads and changing the remote quality of some of these small valleys.





Strong pattern of well-kept hedges
The rolling pastures on the Southern Slopes of the High Weald have a strong pattern of prominent hedgerows. In the south-east, thin, heavily-trimmed hedges lie across the open fields like an out-flung net, whilst towards the north-west the hedges are thicker and more overgrown. These hedges produce a patchwork effect across the landscape.
◀



Sunken lanes between high hedges.
There is a dense network of small lanes in this area, many of which wind through the countryside between steep banks, topped with thick hedges. These banks are frequently carpeted with a rich array of flowers and ferns, possible remnants from former woodlands. From a distance, these sunken roads are invisible, their traffic concealed behind the dense banks of vegetation. ▶

Ian Graham

Wooded ghylls between open ridges.
Many steep ghylls support oak, ash and hornbeam woodlands, which are regularly interspersed between the gentle, whale-backed ridges descending from the Heathfield - Battle ridge. These wooded valleys are particularly important both visually and ecologically, in the southern half of the region, where intensive agriculture has left fewer woodlands than in many other areas of the AONB. ▶

Special Features

Details

The particular qualities and features which give a landscape its character and sense of place are not necessarily the most obvious or remarkable. Within the High Weald, in particular along the Southern Slopes, there are certain features which are so widespread that they form an essential part of the local distinctiveness of the AONB.

Post and rail fencing

Split chestnut fencing is used throughout the High Weald. Sweet chestnut is the commonest timber to be coppiced in the AONB today and needs to be 20 - 35 years old to produce timber of a usable size for rails. These fences are highly characteristic of this area and help to support local woodland industries.

◀ Appropriate detailing

Black and white fingerposts

These are still found throughout the High Weald along country lanes. Usually made of timber, they are an accepted part of the image of the 'traditional countryside', one of the few man-made artefacts which are not seen as detracting from the rural nature of the landscape. They are gradually being replaced on major roads.

Inappropriate fencing

Harsh modern materials such as metal and concrete rarely enhance or fit in to the local character of the AONB. Although it would be inappropriate and negative to allow only 'traditional-style' development in the countryside, it should be possible to achieve a compromise which is neither a pastiche of past style nor an imposition of modern convenience, riding rough-shod over local character and materials.

Green Lanes

Green lanes are unmetalled tracks, usually enclosed by hedges, banks or ditches. Some may be of pre-historic origin, whilst others date from Roman or mediaeval times. In the AONB some may be old drove roads, used by the coastal communities to move their flocks into the High Weald for summer grazing.

Green lanes are an important part of the cultural heritage, a physical record of human movement and settlement patterns, often relating to periods in history for which there is little written information. They are often found as an overgrown track, leading off a junction or sharp corner and can be valuable for wildlife as well as recreation.

Green lanes face three major threats :-

Neglect - many, especially those which are not rights of way, are overgrown and waterlogged, eventually becoming impassable and forgotten. Once they are unusable, they may be seen as wasted land and removed.

Incorporation - lanes may be incorporated into adjacent fields or gardens by removal of one boundary.

Erosion - Use by off-road vehicles can cause serious damage, decreasing their value both to other users and to wildlife. ▶

Sarah Green

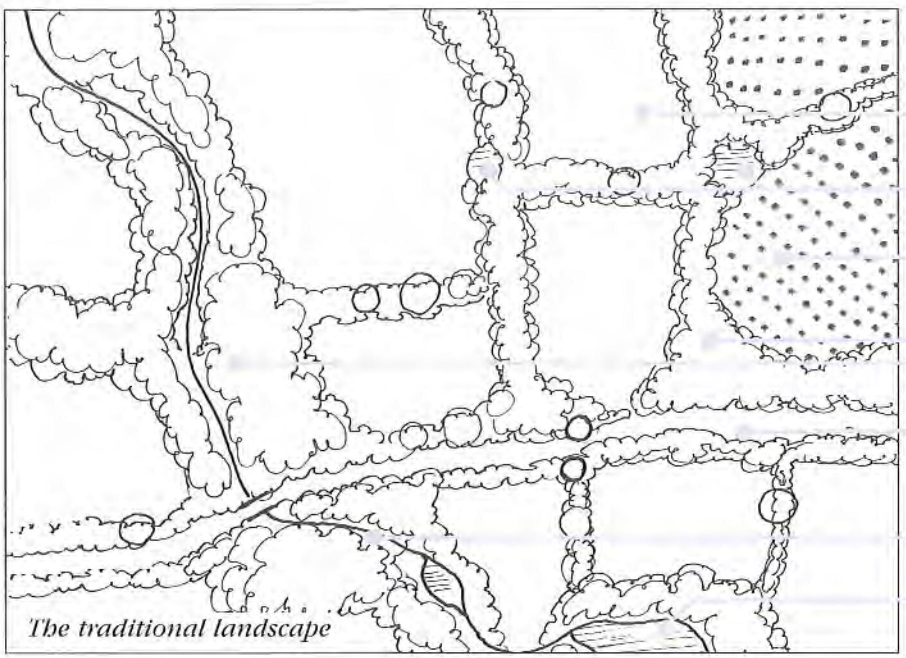
Ian Graham

Sally Marsh

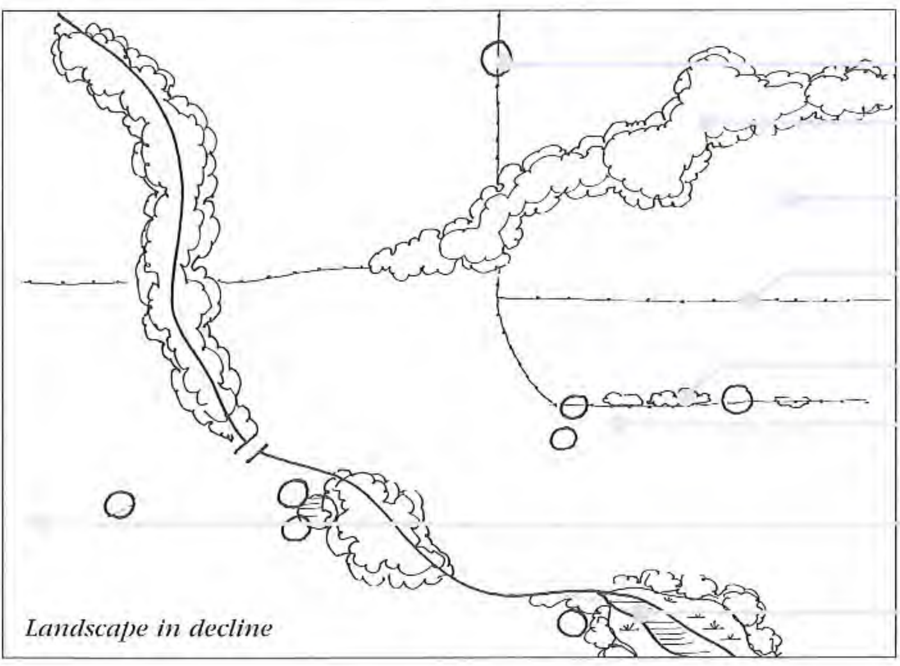
The High Weald skyline ▲

Despite the concealing cloak of woodland, which helps to absorb much of the development within the AONB, the skyline has a great impact on the quality of the area. The majority of main roads and villages in the High Weald are situated on ridge-tops. These same ridges, however, also offer frequent opportunities for extensive views over the countryside, which make any proposal for development on the skyline a particularly sensitive issue. The traditional High Weald horizon is one of well-wooded ridges, interspersed with open fields and dense shaws. Scattered villages, with their clusters of red-tiled roofs surrounding a church spire or tower, such as Mayfield, straddle these hill-tops. In more exposed areas, occasional windmills, fewer now than they once were, still catch the eye. Sadly, some of these windmills no longer have sails and the ridgetops are now more likely to be crowned by twentieth century electricity pylons and radio masts, such as that at Cross in Hand. The unique combination of history, topography and soils has produced a distinctive but sensitive landscape, where certain forms of skyline development may be entirely acceptable to the character of the area, whilst others could so easily damage it, not just in the immediate locality but far across the countryside of the AONB.

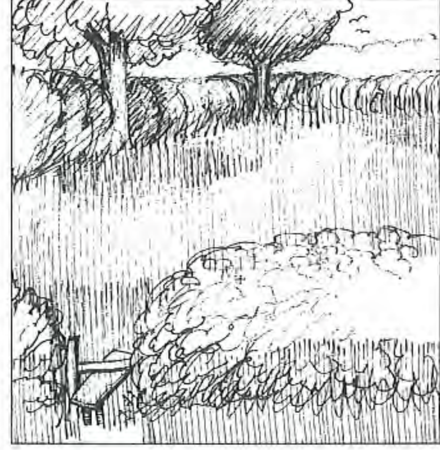
Pressures and change



The traditional landscape



Landscape in decline

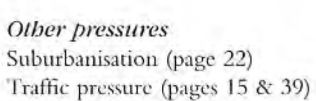


Decline in traditional landscape structure

The loss of the basic structural elements of the landscape, such as hedges, shaws, hedgerow trees and woods can completely alter the character of the countryside.

◀ *Traditional structure*

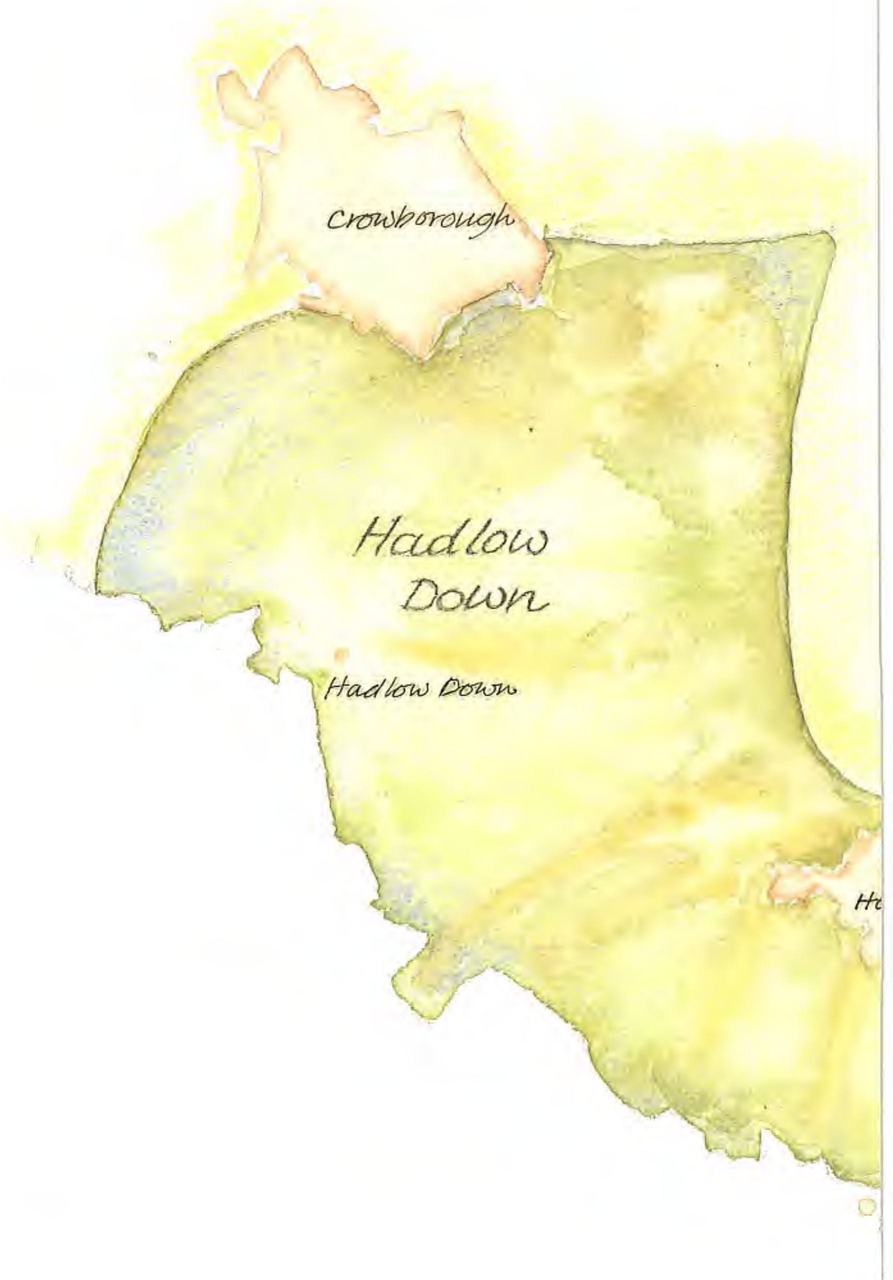
Structure in decline ▶



Other pressures

Suburbanisation (page 22)

Traffic pressure (pages 15 & 39)



Hadlow Down

The small villages between Crowborough and Heathfield lie in a well-wooded, small-scale landscape, whose network of tiny ghylls and ridges is criss-crossed by thick, overgrown hedges and frequent mature oak trees. The single-track lanes which wind gently between these hedges are fringed by primroses and long grasses, which flop drunkenly over the tarmac. This area underwent a considerable growth in popularity and development in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and many houses cluster along the roads, creating a well-settled landscape. Around Cross in Hand, the thick scattering of new housing, accompanied by conifer hedges, is leading to a gradual suburbanisation of this area. Much of this housing is brick-built and the woodlands around it are host to naturalised laurel and rhododendron. The beautiful landscape, designed by Humprey Repton at Heathfield Park, dominates the countryside on the eastern edge of Heathfield.

Further west, towards Crowborough, pine, gorse and bracken become more common, on the increasingly acidic soils around Ashdown Forest. Between the patches of ribbon-development, however, there is a remote, unspoilt feel to this area, where the intricate topography and dense vegetation combine to isolate the countryside from the influence of the towns nearby.

▼ *Suburbanisation*

▲ *Near Warbleton*

Ashburnham

The eighteenth century enclosures of waste and common land have produced a landscape of wide, regular fields and narrow hedges. The high proportion of arable land in this area produces an ever-changing mosaic of greens and yellows across the long, open slopes. A number of large woodlands between Dallington and Penhurst clothe the steep valleys around the Ash Bourne, helping to obscure the collapsed dams of the empty hammer ponds. Further south, however, the woodlands are reduced to narrow strips along the ghylls, for example along the Chilsham Stream and the Clippingham Stream.

Although this is a verdant countryside, where the hedges and shaws give an important structure to the landscape, many of these features are in decline. Gappy hedges are slowly being replaced by wire fencing and few of the woodlands are still coppiced, as they once were. Many of the small ponds which lie hidden along the fieldsides, are overgrown and silting up, whilst the hedgerow trees suffer from the decay wrought by old age and storm damage. Tiny villages or hamlets are typical in this area - Ponts Green, Trolliloes, Brown Bread Street, Warbleton......some are no more than a few houses clustered round a shingle-spired church or a public house. Others are just a scattering of cottages, whilst some of the larger ones, such as Rushlake Green, centre on an open green, where the early villagers grazed their animals. Many of the houses are timber-framed and hung with red tiles although sandstone is also widely used, especially on the Ashburnham estate, whose heart is the historic parkland designed by Capability Brown.

0 1 2 3
Kilometres

Conclusion

The beauty of the High Weald results from its combination of intricate topography, its varied agricultural tapestry and its rich legacy of historic buildings. This assessment has identified what makes the High Weald special. It has defined the identity of local areas and some of the characteristics which make up this nationally important landscape. It has also examined the main forces for change and identified the gradual decline in landscape structure, the decline in woodland management and the gradual suburbanisation of the countryside as three of the major pressures affecting the landscape of the AONB.

The High Weald is primarily a farming landscape of great beauty but relatively low productivity. National and European agricultural policies are currently undergoing changes in response to widespread agricultural overproduction and public demands for environmental sensitivity. For the first time since the Second World War, agriculture is no longer necessarily the priority for land use in the countryside, especially in marginal or less productive areas such as the High Weald.

It is clear from this situation that the landscape of the High Weald AONB will change. What is also clear is that in order to ensure that such change is acceptable to the community in the future, positive planning and management is essential. It is likely that commercial agriculture will continue to decline. Whilst contributing to the pressures outlined above, however, this may also provide opportunities for alternative land-uses, such as the encouragement of wildlife or forestry. The way the landscape is affected by these changes is in the hands of us all - individuals, landowners land managers and planners. In particular, the local community have both a keen interest and a primary role in the conservation of the character and quality of the High Weald landscape.

This landscape assessment, and the subsequent High Weald AONB Management Plan, will contribute to a better understanding of the importance and diversity of the landscape of the High Weald. Understanding what we have is the first step towards agreeing positive action, both through community and individual initiatives, to conserve and enhance the unique character of the AONB.

Further Contacts

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ME14 2LX.

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East Sussex County Council,
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For West Sussex
Countryside Area Manager for the High Weald,
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County Hall,
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The Countryside Manager,
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Surrey County Council,
West House,
Merrow Lane,
Guildford,
Surrey,
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Acknowledgements

The project was initiated and steered by the High Weald Landscape Assessment Steering Group, whose members were:

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The study team were Rebecca Warren and Valerie Alford.

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The illustrations were by Valerie Alford and all photographs were taken by Martin Jones, unless otherwise credited.

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