

8. Landscape Change

8.1 Introduction

8.1.1 The character of the landscape has evolved and been influenced by developments in agriculture, communications and industry and by settlement within the landscape. There have been periods when change has been particularly rapid and periods where there has been little change. The purpose of this chapter is to summarise the changes that have generally taken place across the area as a whole and to assess the current issues now facing the landscape.

8.1.2 Historically mining and quarrying and the development of the transport infrastructure have been important influences in the area particularly towards the end of the 19th century. They have left their legacies in different ways. The most significant changes in recent times have occurred since the start of World War II. These changes can broadly be summarised under three headings as follows:

- Agricultural changes
- Natural processes
- Development

8.2 Agricultural and Other Changes

8.2.1 The wartime and post-war drive to improve agricultural yields aided by new crop varieties, larger machines and increased use of pesticides and inorganic fertilisers has resulted in a raft of changes; some very obvious and others more subtle and longer term.

Field Enlargement

8.2.2 Many hedges were removed in order to improve efficiency and to accommodate larger machines. This has occurred fairly consistently across the area but only rarely has resulted in the complete loss of the historic grain or character of the landscape. The rate of hedge removal has progressively declined over the last 15 years or so culminating in the introduction of controls through the Hedgerow Regulations in 1997. Hedgerow removal has usually also involved removal of trees though occasionally trees have been left within the enlarged fields.

Loss of Orchards

8.2.3 Historically most settlements and farms had orchards nearby for cider production. These are no longer required and as a result orchards have often been ploughed up, left to deteriorate or in several cases because of their position at the edges of villages have been developed for housing. Remaining orchards are a link to the past and are

a reminder of the historic character which was once typical across the area.

Loss of Historic Parkland

8.2.4 Parkland was an important part of the working landscape in the 17th and 18th centuries. Many of these have declined in area or disappeared as more land was ploughed up for arable production or short-term pasture.

Loss of Trees and Habitats

8.2.5 The impact of greater agricultural intensification on the landscape has included both loss of diverse habitats and loss of trees. The decline of herb-rich limestone grassland has been particularly marked. Likewise the number of trees within fields and along field boundaries has declined. Trees lost through disease or old age are often not replaced.

Reduced Diversity

8.2.6 The emphasis on greater efficiency and increased production has also tended to create a less diverse landscape. There is a tendency for larger areas of single crops in contrast to the diverse landscape of different crops in adjoining fields described by author H.V. Morton⁽¹⁾ in 1927 as a 'squared patchwork of gold, sage-green, apple-green and red'.

Management of Field Boundaries

8.2.7 The high cost of traditional intensive hedge maintenance has resulted in the widespread use of mechanical hedge trimming. This is a convenient method and achieves a neat result relatively quickly. The downside has been the tendency for hedges to become 'gappy' over time. They cease to be stock proof and as a result fences are often erected against hedges to deter the escape of stock particularly sheep. Conversely in places hedges have been allowed to grow tall and also tend to become 'gappy'.

8.2.8 Where walls mark the field boundaries there has also been a tendency for them to deteriorate, particularly where arable crops are grown and where they are no longer required to contain stock.

Modern Barns

8.2.9 The requirements of modern farming to over-winter large numbers of stock, store their feed-stuffs and store and maintain a variety of large machinery has led to a proliferation of large, modern barns. Inevitably there has also been deterioration of traditional, smaller barns or their conversion to residential use.

8.2.10 The large, modern barns are often very prominent and unsightly in the countryside. Prominent

locations are part of the problem but modern materials, pre-fabrication techniques, unsympathetic industrial design and earth modelling are the key factors.

8.2.12 Traditionally barns are built using local materials and locally distinctive designs and even when sited in prominent locations away from the main farm complex, they sit sympathetically in the landscape.

Horse Paddocks

8.2.13 Horse ownership has increased enormously since the 1970s resulting in constant demand for horse paddocks particularly on the edges of settlements. Horse paddocks are distinctive in appearance with fields often being sub-divided into smaller units by a variety of forms of fencing. The most common form of fencing today appears to be white tape which is particularly visible and discordant. In addition paddocks are frequently over-grazed resulting in unsightly weedy or churned up ground and loss of ecological value.

Woodland Planting

8.2.14 There are significant opportunities for tree planting. This is generally desirable given the existing low percentage of woodland across the area as a whole and can contribute significantly to landscape character provided the location and species planted are appropriate. Conversely tree planting carried out inappropriately can have a negative impact on landscape character.

Verge Maintenance

8.2.15 Reduced or lack of cutting of wider verges has locally had significant nature conservation impacts and has affected the character of some roads resulting from colonisation by scrub. Likewise timing of cuts within the one metre strip adjacent to the road surface can be significant if for example it involves cutting of characteristic species such as cow parsley or meadow crane's-bill when flowering is at a peak.

Archaeology

8.2.16 Archaeological remains whether buried or surviving as structures and earthworks are an important aspect of landscape character and are highly vulnerable to agricultural change. Both earthworks and buried sites can be irreversibly damaged or destroyed through tree planting, ploughing of ancient pasture and the creation of fishing lakes and even wildlife ponds. Much of this will be the result of farm diversification through organic reversion and afforestation. The English Heritage Monuments at Risk Programme published in 1995 recognised that agriculture was the biggest threat to the continued survival of archaeological remains outside the urban environment.

8.3 Natural Processes

Dutch Elm Disease

8.3.1 The disease has affected the area since the late 1960s with the resultant loss of a large number of very prominent field and hedgerow trees which epitomised the enclosed rural English landscape. Even today the disease continues to affect suckering elms which start to die out when they grow large enough to become infected. The loss of elms has had a dramatic effect on views both within villages and across the open agricultural landscape. The loss of elms and the impact of dead and dying trees has been referred to in some character areas where particularly evident as part of the survey and analysis. However elms appear to have been fairly well distributed in all but the higher plateau areas and therefore these references should not be taken to indicate either the only areas of elms or the most heavily affected areas.

Phytophthora Disease in Alders

8.3.2 This water-born fungal disease has spread rapidly in recent years killing many riverside alders. This is having a significant impact affecting many river valley landscapes.

Storm Damage

8.3.3 The loss of trees through the 1986 and 1990 storms has had a more localised effect noticeable in particular where trees have been lost on exposed ridges, leaving a ragged skyline with scattered remaining mature trees.

Invasive Species

8.3.4 The introduction in Victorian times of ornamental exotic species has resulted in the spread of invasive species such as Japanese knotweed and Himalayan balsam. These crowd out native species affecting biodiversity as well as impacting on the visual characteristics of the landscape.

8.4 Development

Chew Valley Lake

8.4.1 One of the most dramatic changes has been the damming of the River Chew in the 1950s to create the Chew Valley Lake to supply water for Bristol. This is now a major scenic and recreational resource and is also important for its nature conservation value.

New Housing and associated works

8.4.2 Post-war housing development has taken place at the edges of many settlements. Use of modern materials, housing density and layout and the constraints placed upon design by building and highway standards as well as the homogenising effect of volume housing have resulted in the loss of precious local distinctiveness. In addition these

developments tend to have a very poorly designed interface with the countryside and their appearance is often jarring in views from the countryside. There are few examples where modern housing has enhanced or reflected local distinctiveness or local character. Likewise extensions, new boundaries and other works to existing properties are often implemented without reference to the local character in the design or materials used.

8.4.3 Perhaps the most recent example of visually significant large-scale housing is the 1990s development on the south side of Peasedown St John. As with a number of other developments this is very prominent in the landscape by virtue of its siting on a ridge-top, its density which has allowed virtually no space for large trees and green space amongst the housing and the combination of factors outlined above.

Commercial Development

8.4.4 Likewise office buildings, industry and industrial units are often located at prominent locations at the edges of settlements causing extensive intrusion into the wider landscape as at Old Mills Midsomer Norton, the northern edge of Paulton and the Westfield Industrial Estate at Radstock.

Telecommunication Masts

8.4.5 The rapid rise in the use of mobile phones has necessitated an ever-increasing demand for masts by a number of cell phone companies. They are located in prominent places to maximise coverage and therefore are inevitably widely visible and can have a significant detrimental impact on views. The pressure is likely to continue as the new generation of phones are introduced requiring ever greater numbers of masts.

Increased Traffic

8.4.6 This is evidenced through not only the building of new sections of road such as the Peasedown St John bypass but also through more diffuse changes. These include removal of traditional hedges and widening of verges to improve sight lines and widening of roads, either planned or by default, resulting in the narrowing or removal of grass verges. Traffic jams are now a regular occurrence on previously quiet country lanes especially at morning and evening rush hour and at school pick-up times. A knock on effect of increased traffic is the effect of traffic noise which impacts on the tranquility of the countryside and unsightly muddy unplanned passing places on narrow lanes.

Increased Light Spillage

8.4.7 With increased development has come increased light spillage from settlements, from road junctions and street lighting and from floodlighting of sport

itches. The park and ride car park on the sky-line at Odd Down is a recent example.

Recreation

8.4.8 Recreational use of the countryside has mixed blessings for landscape character. At least in theory more people using the countryside for leisure activities brings much needed income to the countryside and increases awareness of the value of landscape encouraging sensitive conservation and management practices to protect and enhance the landscape.

8.4.9 Problems can occur where visitor pressure results in over-use. Countryside "honey-pots" in the area include Chew Valley Lake, the River Avon at Saltford, the Kennet and Avon Canal, the Cotswolds and the Mendips. Visitor and landscape management occurs actively at all these places.

8.4.10 Some leisure activities can cause significant problems in the landscape. In the late 1980s and early 1990s there was a national boom in proposals for golf courses. Because of their large size, very particular layout and need for ancillary buildings and car parking, golf courses can have a high negative impact on landscape character in the countryside. Within the area there are currently only four courses, Stockwood being the most rural and prominent in the countryside. Likewise demands for playing fields, particularly at the edge of developed areas, can have a significant impact on landscape character through for example regrading of the landform and provision of ancillary equipment and buildings.

8.4.11 In recent years mountain biking and other activities such as trail biking and off-road driving have done significant damage to green lanes and other tracks and paths and areas of open countryside. These are also often very noisy and can therefore conflict with other activities in otherwise quiet countryside. Whilst some of these off-road activities have organisations which issue guidelines for responsible behaviour, others do not, or individuals choose not to join.

8.4.12 Horse riding can also have a detrimental effect on landscape character. The area has relatively few bridleways. This coupled with the ongoing increase in horse ownership puts enormous pressure on existing bridleways and often results in problems of erosion.

9. Conclusion

9.1 This document has demonstrated the diversity of the area ranging from the higher ground of the Mendip slopes and Cotswold plateau, through the undulating limestone hills and plateaux to the intimate valleys of the tributaries of the River Avon and the open floodplain of the River Avon. Much of the landscape can be understood in terms of the deposits of Jurassic Limestone and its subsequent variable erosion by the various river systems. The diversity is reflected in the subdivision of the area into 18 distinct landscape character areas. Approximately one third of the area is recognised to be of national significance through inclusion within either the Mendip Hills AONB or the Cotswolds AONB. In addition the majority of the rural parts of the area also fall within the Bristol/Bath Green Belt. This designation is important in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment. This document seeks to recognise the valued characteristic of each landscape regardless of any designation.

9.2 This assessment recognises the way the landscape has evolved and the way it needs to change and adapt to meet developing requirements and expectations. It is clearly not possible to identify the pressures for change in the future although climate change is likely to be one. It is now widely recognised that climate change is likely to exert powerful and inevitable pressure for change in the next 50 years. What is less clear is quite how the changes will manifest in terms of local climate and its impact on the landscape and local agricultural economy.

9.3 Many landscape changes such as hedge removal resulting from agricultural change have slowed down in recent years, however it is clear that there are ongoing challenges and challenges that have yet to be identified. Whatever the source of change, it needs to be managed so as to conserve the valued and diverse character of the area and to ensure that future changes enhance rather than detract from that character.

9.4 The landscape character assessment is an important mechanism for maintaining and enhancing the rich and varied landscape of Bath and North East Somerset. By documenting landscape character as it is now, we have a vital base-line which will help us assess future change and direct future projects. It is intended to prepare guidelines for specific issues such as development at the edge of settlements or strategies for specific areas such as priority areas for new tree planting. It is also intended that the assessment will provide a useful basis for local communities in carrying out more detailed assessments such as Parish Plans or Village Design Statements. This project may also be a useful vehicle for bringing together information on

the local landscape across the area as a whole. It will also provide an overview for detailed assessments by developers in support of planning applications.

Glossary

Batch	Local term for coal mining waste tips which are often characterised by steep sloping sides. The area includes examples which have been planted with trees and examples where the tips remain bare and unvegetated.								
Biodiversity	The variety of wildlife and the habitats they occupy.								
Brashy	Term used to describe soils containing a high proportion of loose broken rock.								
Character	A distinct, recognisable and consistent pattern of elements in the landscape.								
Characteristics	Those elements that in combination create the distinctive character of an area.								
Characterisation	The process of identifying areas of similar character, classifying and mapping them and describing their character.								
Condition	In the context of this assessment refers to the physical state of repair of the landscape and elements which make up the landscape character. This influences the integrity or completeness of the landscape character.								
Detractor	Elements of the view which compromise the character of the landscape.								
Drift	Geological term used to describe superficial deposited material, often brought by ice or glacial meltwater, and distinguished from solid geology.								
Feature	Elements of the landscape which form important components of the landscape. They are usually prominent or eye-catching like tree clumps, church towers, or wooded skylines.								
Field pattern	<table><tr><td>Angular</td><td>Field pattern with fields mainly with right-angled corners but not necessarily creating a regular field pattern.</td></tr><tr><td>Irregular</td><td>Field pattern of variable sized and variable shaped fields.</td></tr><tr><td>Rectilinear</td><td>Field pattern with fields of a rectangular shape repeated across the landscape.</td></tr><tr><td>Regular</td><td>Field pattern of fields of roughly the same size and shape repeated across the landscape.</td></tr></table>	Angular	Field pattern with fields mainly with right-angled corners but not necessarily creating a regular field pattern.	Irregular	Field pattern of variable sized and variable shaped fields.	Rectilinear	Field pattern with fields of a rectangular shape repeated across the landscape.	Regular	Field pattern of fields of roughly the same size and shape repeated across the landscape.
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Regular	Field pattern of fields of roughly the same size and shape repeated across the landscape.								
Field size	<p>Field sizes have been analysed and described as small, medium and large within the context of the area using the following dimensions:</p> <table><tr><td>Small</td><td>- up to 3.5 ha</td></tr><tr><td>Medium</td><td>- between 3.6 and 13.5 ha</td></tr><tr><td>Large</td><td>- greater than 13.5 ha</td></tr></table>	Small	- up to 3.5 ha	Medium	- between 3.6 and 13.5 ha	Large	- greater than 13.5 ha		
Small	- up to 3.5 ha								
Medium	- between 3.6 and 13.5 ha								
Large	- greater than 13.5 ha								
'Gappy'	Term used to describe the thin character of hedges primarily resulting from the type of management used or from their overgrown nature. These hedges are not likely to be stock-proof without additional fencing.								
Green Lane	Grassed routes enclosed by hedges. Sometimes formed along estate boundaries or forming part of historic routes.								
Head	Geological term used to describe locally derived material deposited as a result of water carrying it from higher ground.								

Horsiculture	The use of land for keeping, stabling and exercising horses.
Ramsar Site	Site identified under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat. This requires the conservation of listed sites.
RIGS	Regionally Important Geological Sites. Sites of local importance for geology designated for their scientific and educational value.
SAC or cSAC	Special Area of Conservation or Candidate Special Area of Conservation. Sites of international importance intended to protect habitats of threatened species of wildlife identified under Article 3 of the EC Directive on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Fauna and Flora (the Habitats Directive). These sites are also SSSIs under national legislation, however special considerations, as set out by the Habitats Directive, apply to development proposals in or likely to affect them.
Scheduled Monument	A nationally important archaeological site or monument included in the Secretary of State for Media, Culture and Sport's list of Ancient Monuments protected under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979.
Shrunken medieval village	An existing village that was once larger than it is today with earlier buildings and garden plots usually visible as earthworks.
SNCI	Site of Nature Conservation Importance. Sites of local importance for nature conservation designated for their scientific and community value.
SPA	Special Protection Area. Sites of international importance classified under the EC Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds. These sites are also SSSIs under national legislation, however special considerations, as set out by the Habitats Directive, apply to development proposals directly or indirectly affecting them.
SSSI	Site of Special Scientific Interest notified under section 28 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Development proposals in or likely to affect these must be subject to special scrutiny.
SPG	Supplementary Planning Guidance. Planning Guidance which supplements the policies and proposals of the development plan, giving more detailed advice on a particular topic or site.

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