Appendix 7

Countryside Agency/Natural England Countryside Character Assessment
Area 91 Yardley – Whittlewood Ridge
Key Characteristics

- Broad plateau with shallow soils elevated above adjacent vales.
- A strong historic landscape character, largely due to the continued presence of extensive areas of ancient woodland.
- Mixed land uses of pasture, arable and woodland.
- Generally medium-sized fields with full hedges and hedgerow trees, mainly oak.
- Low density of settlement and consequently few local roads; cut through by major north-south canal, rail and road routes.

Landscape Character

The Ridge rises steadily up from the Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire Claylands (which here extend in to north Buckinghamshire) to the south and east. In the north the land drops down to the Nene Valley, the southernmost of the Northamptonshire Vales. Thus, although only reaching elevations of some 150 m in the west and slowly dipping down to 80 m in the east, it is physically distinct from the adjacent low-lying vales and forms a noticeable broad plateau.

The area is predominantly agricultural in character, with a mix of arable, mixed and pastoral farming. Pastoral farming is predominant in the west, giving way to a more open, arable landscape as the land dips slightly to the east. However, the thin and variable soils have historically constrained agricultural development so that much of the area is wooded and has been so since at least the 13th century. The landscape elements form simple combinations, of stretches of arable alternating with pasture, with a backdrop of large, dark, woodland blocks. Woods such as Salcey Forest are extensive and have a network of rides and occasional open grasslands contained within the woodland - the ‘lawns’ which provided hay and pasture for commoners cattle.

The woodland blocks are largely oak or mixed with other broadleaves and, in some places, oaks planted in the early 19th century still remain. More recent planting of coniferous species has formed dense plantations and these can create particularly dark and impenetrable backdrops to the local farmland landscape. These dark blocks form striking contrasts with the fresh greens of spring foliage and the rich autumn colours of the deciduous woodland.

The Ridge is a broad plateau with shallow soils. The elevated position, predominance of arable usage and low hedges create extensive open views, with village churches often prominent on the local skyline.

From the gently undulating plateau top, the land can be seen to slope gently away in most directions with long views over the surrounding vales. This gives a feel of being elevated, of openness and expansiveness. Such views, however, are frequently cut off by the large blocks of woodland which are a constant feature of the plateau top. Its elevation above surrounding land has made it suitable for telecommunications masts and airfields - one of the latter is now the Silverstone race track. The associated activities and facilities for occasional large numbers of visitors as well as other recreational facilities such as golf courses and parks, bring a suburban feel into local landscapes.

The few minor roads on the Ridge are bounded by hedges but have wide verges which are often herb-rich. Hedges are generally substantial and species rich and are often filled out with elm suckers. There are plenty of hedgerow trees, mostly oak with some ash. Many of these are mature and stag-headed, although some hedges show several young ash saplings growing up to form potential new hedgerow trees.
There are a number of parks in the area which, with their mature parkland trees, avenues and woodland rides, add to the historic feel of the landscape. The Grand Union Canal, running through the valley cut by the river Tove, creates a local landscape of waterways with locks, bridges and weirs.

The Ridge does have an historic feel to it, in particular in those parts which are contained by the extensive areas of woodland. These contrast with more open plateau areas which can be non-descript - indeed it has been described as a ‘flattish, rather dull landscape’.

**Physical Influences**

The Ridge forms a low watershed between the catchments of the Nene to the north and the Great Ouse to the south. The Tove drains the vale in the north, turning at Towcester to cut through the Ridge at Grafton Regis and then flows south east and joins the Great Ouse.

There is a noticeable absence of other watercourses on the Ridge.

The area of the broad plateau is cut through by major north-south transport routes of canals, railways and roads such as the M1 motorway.
Underlying the Ridge are Jurassic Oolitic limestones which run in a south-west to north-east alignment, parallel to the more substantial Middle Lias ironstones of Northamptonshire to the north west. Subsequent glacial activity has smoothed over this outcrop and left irregular drifts of boulder clay over the underlying Cornbrash. Accordingly soils are patchy and varied, ranging from a free-draining chalky till to less permeable clay. In places the underlying limestone comes close to the surface and has been quarried for local building stone.

**Historical and Cultural Influences**

There is some evidence of pre-Roman settlement, because the plateau was less boggy than the adjacent clay lowlands. Roman influence was limited to major routes crossing the Ridge which ran through two Roman settlements just to the north, Watling Street (now the A5) ran from London to Towcester and on to the north-west and another route passed through Irchester and on to the north.

During Anglo-Saxon times, clearance of woodland and the establishment of settlements continued. However, the main influence on the landscape, which is what largely creates its distinctive character today, was the appropriation of the extensive woodlands along the Ridge as Royal Forests from the 13th century. The woods of Whittlewood and Salcey were passed to the Dukes of Grafton. Whittlewood comprised 6,000 acres, of which 4,500 acres were woodland in 1608, while Salcey Forest (which includes Yardley Chase) covered 1,100 acres, and most of this was coppice. Such Forests provided a source of fuel and building material as well as hunting grounds for the nobility. Appropriated in this way, the area avoided the more intensive clearance of woodland, drainage and settlement that occurred on the adjacent clay lowlands.

This structure, of widespread forest, with ‘lawns’ for pasture, and small Forest villages (nucleated villages with open fields, whose residents had some rights over the Forest lands), continued until the early 17th century. Records show that, for instance around Knotting, clearance of some forest areas started at this time, to extend agricultural land, and continued through to the late 18th century. Clearance of woodland speeded up with the Parliamentary Enclosure Acts in the late 18th century and became more rapid in the early 19th century. Thus there are, until this time, historic references to extensive ancient forests around Melchbourne and to Odell Great Wood and Knotting West Wood where now there are large arable fields and few trees at all.

The poet William Cowper lived at Olney in 1767, moving to Weston Underwood in 1786, and spent much of his time walking in the woods.

**Buildings and Settlement**

The Ridge has a low population and the settlements, which are small and relatively few, tend to occur along the edges of the Ridge. Towcester, a busy small town, lies on the north-west edge of the area and Brackley, a rapidly expanding town, lies to the west.

Some of the few villages actually on the Ridge were Forest Villages, nucleated villages with open fields, (until the Enclosures) whose residents held rights over the Forest lands. Thus Ashton, Hartwell, Hackleton, Piddington, Quinton and Hanslope were all villages of the Forest of Salcey. During the medieval period, villages contracted as a result of the plague and later as part of the rural depopulation arising from the enclosures. The latter probably had less of an impact on the Ridge than on the surrounding lowlands.

Probably the most famous group of buildings and artefacts is to be found at Stowe Park. Now occupied by Stowe School, it was originally built in a formal layout, in the early 18th century, with two striking elm lined avenues running up to it. The remarkable series of buildings in the grounds were laid out between 1713 and 1763. In the 1730s, Kent introduced a more naturalistic style to the layout of the grounds.

Further parks and estates were established on the Ridge, as at Biddlesden, Melchbourne and Whittlebury. Formal landscapes, with massive avenues and woodland rides, are found at Castle Ashby and Chase Park. Rural depopulation again, in the early 19th century, left some villages more loosely structured and less compact, for instance Knotting. Adjacent towns such as Northampton and Wellingborough expanded rapidly with industrial activity in the 19th century, but with little apparent impact on the Ridge.

Building materials are varied with red brick and the soft local Oolitic limestone, ranging from warm greys to
subdued ochres, both frequently used with either grey slate or red pantile roofing. Steep thatched roofs also occur, more frequently towards the east. This mixture of materials can be attractive in itself, as at Yelden, while other villages, like Whittlebury, have a more eclectic mix of building styles, including red brick houses with limestone frontages. But there are also some very attractive compact villages where the local limestone predominates as a building material, such as Shalstone and Ravenstone, and with a high proportion of thatched roofs, as at Alderton.

Land Cover

There is a relatively high woodland cover, of up to 15 per cent in Yardley Chase. These large woodlands, many of them now managed by the Forestry Authority, are of oak, or oak and ash standards, with coppiced oak, and an understorey of birch, hazel, alder and willow.

This woodland combines with permanent pasture, leys and winter cereals. Pasture is more dominant on the higher land to the west, giving way to arable cropping on the lower, less undulating land to the east. The recent influence of ‘horsiculture’, with its small paddocks and miscellaneous artefacts has an impact on land adjacent to settlements.

The elevated and wide plateau top makes it suitable for airfields, two of which - Silverstone and Santa Pod - are now used for race tracks. Silverstone is a Grand Prix circuit and, as such, attracts huge volumes of visitors on occasions while at Santa Pod there are a variety of other small industrial and miscellaneous activities, creating locally a very untidy and cluttered landscape.

Routes tend to cut across the Ridge rather than follow it. As already mentioned, two major Roman routes pass through on their way north. The river Tove cuts through the gap at Grafton Regis as does the Grand Union Canal and the main northern railway line from Euston. At Roade, in order to maintain gentle gradients, the railway is in a particularly impressive cutting, one and a half miles long, and 70 feet deep.

The Changing Countryside

- Agricultural intensification, in particular moving from pastoral/mixed to arable, has resulted in a consequent increase in field size, loss of hedgerows, fragmentation or loss of semi-natural habitats and damage to historic features. In the predominantly arable areas, hedges are over-trimmed and mismanaged.

- The replanting of woodlands with conifers, and the introduction of non-native broadleaf species into ancient woodlands, has had an impact both on the landscape and on the nature-conservation interest of the woodlands. The historic character of the landscape is particularly vulnerable to such changes in woodland cover and structure.

- Dutch Elm disease has had a dramatic effect over recent decades, resulting in the widespread loss of hedgerow trees, although oak and ash are more substantial components on these shallow soils than in the clay vales. The continuing occurrence of the disease prevents elm suckers from establishing as hedgerow trees.
The Ridge is mainly agricultural in character, and includes medium sized arable fields bounded by full hedges with mature trees, usually of oak.

- Development pressures on the villages are evident but have been reasonably well contained. Pressures for leisure and recreational facilities, in particular golf courses, are increasing. Developments in the open countryside have had an impact on the simple but strong structure of the landscape and its historic character.

**Shaping the Future**

- The retention of the character and nature-conservation value of the woodlands could be achieved through management, to include replanting oak and replacing introduced species with native species. There is also scope for establishing new and maintaining existing broadleaved woodland on private land.

- The possibility of re-creating some aspects of the historic landscape, for instance by restoring ‘lawns’ which are now arable back to pasture should be considered. Similarly, opportunities exist for the improved management of hedgerows and protection for naturally regenerating hedgerow trees.

- Pressures for recreational facilities, such as golf courses and holiday villages, and for farm diversification need to be handled carefully and particular care taken to integrate such schemes into the landscape structure.

**Selected References**

