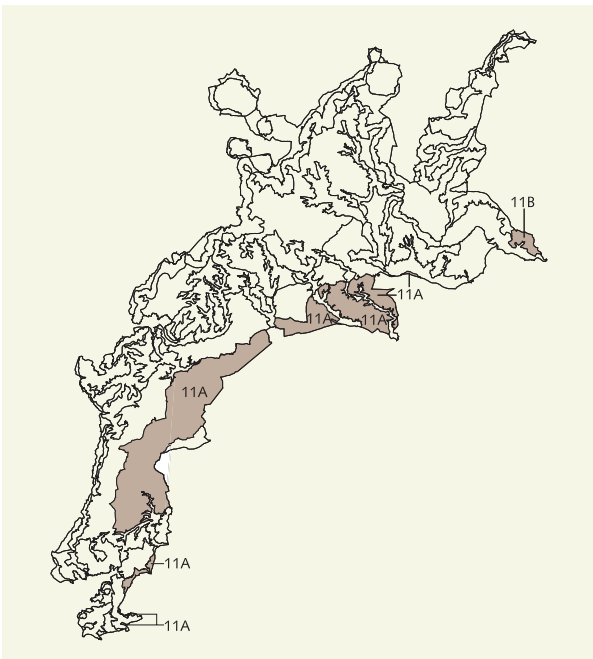


## 11 DIP-SLOPE LOWLAND

### Character Areas

- 11A South and Mid Cotswolds Lowlands
- 11B Stonesfield Lowlands



### Key Characteristics

- Broad area of gently sloping, undulating lowland with a predominantly south-easterly fall, changing to a north-easterly fall in the southern perimeter of the area;
- lowland landform gently dissected by infrequent small watercourses flowing into the main rivers that cross the area, reinforcing the general grain of the topography;
- strong and structured farmland character, more intimate and smaller in scale than the High Wold and High Wold Dip-Slope;
- well-managed, productive agricultural landscape of mixed arable and improved pasture, together with more limited areas of permanent pasture, mainly within the valley bottoms;

- seasonal variations in colour and texture associated with mixed arable farming;
- medium to large scale, regular fields predominate mainly enclosed by hedgerows, with hedgerow trees, together with some stone walls or post and wire fencing;
- woodland cover limited to intermittent copses and shelterbelts within agricultural land, but balanced by extensive broadleaved, mixed and coniferous plantations within the large estates and associated farmland areas;
- limited areas of ancient woodland and species rich grassland;
- settlement pattern of intermittent small nucleated villages, hamlets, and isolated farmsteads, together with occasional larger settlements;
- distinctive pattern of large estates and associated planned parkland landscape and woodland occurring throughout the Dip-Slope Lowland; and
- evidence of long period of occupation of the area.

### Landscape Character

The Dip-Slope Lowland comprises a broad tract of land that forms the transition between the High Wold Dip-Slope to the north-west, and the lower lying and flatter Thames Basin to the south-east. The principal section of this landscape type extends north of Bath near Marshfield and North Wraxall and then sweeps first northwards, and then north-eastwards along the south-eastern perimeter of the AONB as far as Burford. In contrast to this large and almost continuous tract of land, broken only by the valleys of the Churn and Coln, there are a number of much smaller and fragmented sections of this landscape type. These principally occur in the extreme south of the

AONB, forming small sections of a larger area of Dip-Slope Lowland that extends to the east of the Limpley Stoke section of the Avon Valley, and beyond the designated area, encompassing land extending up to the settlements of Bradford-on-Avon, Melksham and Corsham. A further area of Dip-Slope Lowland occurs in the north-eastern part of the AONB in the vicinity of Stonesfield, forming a transitional landscape above the Evenlode Valley.

The Dip-Slope Lowland is underlain by the limestone formations of the Great Oolite Group, including outcrops of the Forest Marble Formation. It comprises an area of gently undulating lowland, approximately 160m AOD to 100m AOD, with a gentle fall from north-west to south-east, except for the southern sector which assumes a more pronounced west-east fall. Tributary streams are generally infrequent, but where they do occur they have gently dissected the lowland area resulting in local variations in landform. These small valleys generally follow the orientation of the regional slope and dip of the underlying strata, and therefore give the landscape a well-defined grain.

Agriculture is the principal land use across the Dip-Slope Lowland with much of the land under mixed arable and improved pasture, and some permanent pasture predominantly within the valleys. It is generally well managed, within a mosaic of medium to large regular fields, mainly contained by hedgerows. There are also areas where stone walls predominate, generally confined to land surrounding villages, adjacent to farms and within the main estates. It therefore has a strongly structured and productive character. In contrast to the High Wold and Dip-Slope, the area has a smaller and more intimate scale, with views often limited by the flatter landscape and intercepting effect of the mosaic of fields and succession of field boundaries. Nevertheless, from a number of vantage points and more open sections, it is possible to obtain wider views to the south-east towards the North Wessex Downs.

Designed parkland and estate landscapes are a distinctive feature of this landscape character type and include a number of nationally important Registered Gardens and Parks. The extensive woodlands, and planned features, such as avenues and vistas, impart a dramatic and impressive scale to the landscape, and have a strong influence on local landscape character. The large scale of the estate woodlands contrasts with the otherwise generally limited woodland cover across the Dip-Slope Woodland, which is mainly confined to a pattern of small deciduous or mixed copses and shelterbelts, and occasional larger areas of woodland, within the farmed structure. Coniferous plantations of geometric shape are occasional conspicuous elements.

A pattern of small, mainly dispersed villages and hamlets, together with numerous isolated farmsteads and individual buildings, extends across the Dip-Slope Lowland, with Tetbury comprising the only larger settlement within the area. A network of mainly direct local roads connect the numerous villages, while the main section of the A433, a principal route within the area, crosses the general south-easterly grain of the landform. The M4 and main line railway crosses the southern part of the Dip-Slope Lowland.

Archaeological evidence indicates that this landscape has been occupied since the Neolithic period. The time layers of occupation, with successive patterns of land management, have largely been removed or integrated into the enclosure of the land that occurred in the 18th and 19th centuries. It is this process which has had the most significant effect on landscape character, with the resultant strong pattern of regular fields that extends across the area.

### Physical Influences

The Dip-Slope Lowland is located at the eastern and south-eastern limit of the outcrop of Oolitic Limestone within the Cotswolds. Underlain by the succession of Middle Jurassic limestones and mudstones of the Great Oolite Group, including the Forest Marble Formation, only the adjacent and younger Cornbrash Formation is not represented. This latter rock unit underlies the adjacent Cornbrash Lowlands character type (Landscape Character Type 14), and is identified as a separate type as a consequence of the particular characteristics of the rock unit and its surface expression. Beyond this, and to the south-east, the younger Upper Jurassic Oxford Clay form the bedrock to the extensive, low-lying Thames Basin.

The drainage pattern across the main section of the Dip-Slope Lowland has two distinct and separate catchment patterns. The southern section forms part of the Bristol Avon catchment, which follows a particularly tortuous course across the southern perimeter of the AONB. The confluence of the two separate Sherston and Tetbury branches of the upper reaches of this river occurs at Malmesbury, beyond the AONB boundary to the south-west. Infrequent tributaries have gently dissected the lowland area, feeding into the Avon which flows initially within a generally south-west / north-east alignment. It is only beyond the Dip-Slope Lowland that its course alters to east-west, then south, before finally assuming a west flowing course to the Severn. Further north the Dip-Slope Lowland forms part of the Upper Thames Catchment area. Indeed, the source of the Thames is located within this character type, at Thames Head. The Thames catchment rivers of the Churn, Coln and Leach cross the Dip-Slope Lowland in north-west / south-east aligned valleys,

following the dip of the underlying strata. Tributaries of these three main rivers within the Lowland area are infrequent, but where they do occur, together with interconnecting networks of dry valley systems, the valley forms are locally significant.

The small, detached area of Dip-Slope Lowland on the eastern perimeter of the AONB in the vicinity of Stonesfield, forms part of the Evenlode Catchment. This is a gently sloping area with subtle landform variations reflecting dry valley systems connecting into the Evenlode.

Stone slates have been quarried at locations on the Dip-Slope Lowland, largely from the thin fissile limestones at the base of the Great Oolite. Perhaps the most famous are the Stonesfield Slates that were quarried from the fringes of Great Oolite in the vicinity of Stonesfield from the 16th century until the beginning of the 20th century. The extensive use of these natural stone 'slates' for roofing contribute as much to the character of local buildings and vernacular of the Cotswolds as does the stone used for buildings and walls.

As a result of the extensive agricultural 'improvements' and ploughing up of much of the Dip-Slope Lowland, old pasture and calcareous grassland is now very limited. There are, however, a few remnants of calcareous as well as mesotrophic (neutral) grassland remaining within the area, although their impact in the wider landscape is very limited. Ancient woodland is also sparse, although notable stands occur with the managed estates of Badminton and Westonbirt. Much of the woodland areas that cover the area today date from the previous two centuries and the period of enclosure, resulting in a 'planned' character. A pattern of geometric and linear plantations and shelterbelts therefore prevails.

### Human Influences

A number of prehistoric long barrows, and burial mounds are present within the Dip-Slope Lowland. Although less numerous than on the High Wold and High Wold Dip-Slope, their presence is evidence of occupation of the land since the Neolithic. It also suggests that this lower part of the Cotswolds would also have been extensively cleared of trees from this period to ensure visibility of these symbolic features and territory markers, as well to enable cultivation of the land to support these early sedentary, farming communities.

Remnants of Roman occupation are also notable, with the Roman roads of Akeman Street, Fosse Way and Ermin Way running through the Dip-Slope Lowland, converging

on the significant Roman settlement of Cirencester (CORINIVM). Although Cirencester lies immediately outside of the Dip-Slope Lowland, and indeed the AONB, it is surrounded by this landscape type.

The series of historic parks, gardens and designed landscapes that permeate the Dip-Slope Lowland are one of the most significant visible historic landscape features. A number are very extensive, notably Badminton Park, Westonbirt Arboretum, and Cirencester Park, and exert a strong influence over wide tracts of the surrounding landscape as a result of the extensive woodlands, avenues, parkland and planned vistas. The impressive scale and formality of these estates contrast with the smaller scale rural landscape and field mosaic that surrounds them.

Field patterns across the Dip-Slope Lowland comprise a mosaic of both irregular enclosure reflecting former unenclosed cultivation patterns, and regular enclosure that ignores former unenclosed cultivation patterns. In some areas, such as around Rodmarton, the field pattern is identified as regular enclosure of former common pasture. Floated water meadow systems and riverine pastures and meadows are also prevalent along a number of the river channels.

Villages and hamlets tend to be dispersed, with villages mainly having a radial form and hamlets a linear form usually centred at the point where numerous roads converge, e.g. Luckington, and in sheltered locations within the small tributary valleys. Despite this predominance, examples of linear and organic dispersed villages can also be found along with examples of radial and organic dispersed hamlets that are relatively compact. Isolated farms and individual buildings are widespread across the landscape, often located adjacent to roads or at the end of short lanes off roads.

There is little in the way of formal recreation provision in the landscape. However, a number of the historic parks and gardens are open to the public, notably Westonbirt Arboretum, which is of national importance in respect of its tree collection. Numerous footpaths cross the landscape and the Macmillan Way, Thames Path, Wysis Way and Monarch's Way, all long distance footpaths, are located in the west of the landscape type.

There are few landmarks in the landscape although church spires and towers represent important focal features and points of orientation within the lower lying landform. Although infrequent, pylon lines have a significant impact where they occur. Views to the south from the Dip-Slope Lowland are often long and expansive, although to the north, landform of the High Wold limits the extent of views.



## Character Areas

### 11A

#### South Cotswolds Lowlands

The South Cotswolds Lowlands forms an almost continuous area of Dip-Slope Lowland along the eastern and south-eastern side of the Cotswolds, broken only by the valley of the River Churn at Cirencester. Despite the linear extent of the area, there is a strong continuity in its character principally relating to the landform. Generally below the 160m AOD levels, the area has a gently sloping mainly south-easterly grain with more subtle undulations and shallower slope profiles than in the adjacent Dip-Slope Character Type. In the eastern part of the South Cotswolds Lowlands, however, small, often tree lined tributary watercourses and dry valleys systems have dissected the otherwise gentle terrain. There is a consistent pattern of well-managed, productive mixed arable and pastoral landscape across this lower tract of land enclosed by both stone walls and hedgerows with hedgerow trees being a common feature.

This main section of the Dip-Slope Lowland is remarkable for the concentration of Historic Parks, Registered Gardens and private estates throughout the area. A particularly strong cluster occurs in the south-west including Badminton, Westonbirt, Highgrove and Estcourt House, and part of the smaller Pinkney Park adjacent to the River Avon. Further east the planned landscape of Cirencester Park is noteworthy while further east again, Barnsley Park, and the Williamstrip Park adjacent to the Lower Coln Valley, are also significant historic parks. It is likely that the relatively more sheltered locations occurring on the lower slopes of the Cotswolds, together with marginally deeper soils than on the High Wold plateau areas, were important factors in influencing the location of these major estates.

Woodlands within this Character Area vary between the extensive woodlands and plantations within the large estates and a pattern of intermittent smaller woodlands associated with the farmed landscape. Many of the farm copses have been planted within the last two centuries following enclosure and are generally geometric in form, functioning as shelterbelts and game coverts. The extent of ancient woodland is limited, but there is a large area at the north-western side of the Badminton Estate at Swangrove, and, not surprisingly, also within the extensive woodlands associated with the Westonbirt Arboretum, at Silk Wood. Elsewhere, pockets of ancient woodland are generally small in scale such as Alderton Grove to the north of Littleton Drew, and at Shipton Wood to the south of Tetbury within the Estcourt House parkland. These are important but much-depleted remnants of a once more extensive cover. There are notable concentrations of parkland trees within the Badminton Estate and at Westonbirt, which increases the sense of tree cover.

There are very few areas within the Character Area where habitats are sufficiently important or rare to receive national designation. Land to the east of the village of Box and Box Hill is designated as a SSSI and cSAC. The area supports an important habitat and includes one of the few parts of the country where Box (*Buxus sempervirens*) grows naturally. The scattered and generally small areas of calcareous as well as neutral (mesotrophic) grassland are of considerable ecological importance, but their impact on landscape character is only of local significance. Local stone mines are of particular significance and form part of the Bath and Bradford-on-Avon Bats candidate Special Area of Conservation (cSAC). This is notable for the presence of the Greater Horseshoe Bat, one of the largest and rarest bats in the UK, and currently only found in south-west England and south and west Wales. The total UK population is about 5,000. In winter the bats depend on caves, abandoned mines and underground sites for undisturbed hibernation.

Apart from the network of principal and local roads that cross the area, the southern sector is crossed by the M4 and the Swindon / Bristol main railway line. Further north, the Swindon / Stroud railway crosses the area in the vicinity of Thames Head. These major transport routes follow the general grain of the Dip-Slope, and many sections are in cutting so their impact is limited. Nevertheless they generate noise and movement, which affects the peace of the surrounding rural landscape. High voltage power lines have a greater impact, and the sequence of pylons to the north east of Tetbury, and also to the north of the Leach Valley in the vicinity of Aldsworth, are intrusive elements in the landscape.

**11B****Stonesfield Lowlands**

A small area of Dip-Slope Lowland is located on the extreme eastern part of the AONB, within which are the nucleated villages of Stonesfield and Combe. Although detached from the broader sweep of Dip-Slope Lowland to the west, physiographically it forms the transition to lower land from the adjacent area of High Wold Dip-Slope that extends across a more elevated and rolling landscape north and south of the Evenlode Valley.

Beyond the two villages, land use is entirely under agriculture with a predominance of arable production within large regular fields, with evidence of amalgamation. The broad expansive character is emphasised by the large fields, low hedges, and evidence of hedge loss, as well as the generally limited woodland cover. There is, however, a notable area of ancient woodland at Notoaks Wood between the two villages, and occasional geometric blocks of coniferous and broadleaved woodland plantations, particularly north of Combe. In keeping with the local name, a considerable number of rocks and stones are visible in the soil; this is particularly evident during the winter period after ploughing.

The village of Stonesfield gives its name to the 'Stonesfield Slates' that were quarried in the vicinity of the village for many years. The particular characteristics of the fissile sandy limestone rock that outcrops at the base of the Great Oolite make it particularly suitable for splitting into roof 'slates'. Historically the stone was dug in the Autumn and spread out on the ground for winter frosts to invade the thin films of water within the stone to weaken it so that in spring a blow from a mallet would be enough to split the stone into slates. In the village of Stonesfield quarries were small enterprises and the spreading of the stone in the fields was carried out by almost the entire village. Mining of the stone slates ceased over a century ago, when the source was worked out, but the legacy that this locally occurring horizon has had on the appearance of buildings within the Cotswolds is immeasurable. Many of the older buildings in this character area are roofed in locally mined slates.

Although lying beyond the AONB, the influence of the adjacent estate managed landscape of Blenheim Park is evident. The Park and house was added to UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1987. The Palace and grounds were given to John Churchill, First Duke of Marlborough in recognition of his victory over the French in 1704. It is regarded as a perfect example of an 18th century princely home. The Palace is set within an impressive designed landscape attributable to Lancelot 'Capability' Brown.

The line of the former Roman road, Akeman Street crosses the character area, and although no longer used as a road, it now has a recreational focus and is followed by the Oxfordshire Way.