

## 16 BROAD FLOODPLAIN VALLEY

### Character Areas

- 16A Lower Windrush Valley
- 16B Lower Evenlode Valley



### Key Characteristics

- intimate, small scale settled and relatively busy landscape, contrasting with more remote areas of High Wold;
- well-defined broad valley profile of open flat floodplain, river terraces and gentle convex slopes;
- river floodplain features such as meanders, water meadows, ponds, old river channels and islands;
- floodplain and riverside trees including pollarded willows;
- wooded bluffs and areas of species rich grassland on areas of steep landform;

- river corridor marked by main transport routes through the valley;
- valley sides cloaked in improved pasture and arable land form a back drop to the valley floor landscapes;
- land use within valley floor and floodplain dominated by pasture although some extensive areas of arable land on areas less prone to flooding;
- fields defined by hedgerows and some stone walls although the robust framework is eroded by hedgerow loss and the use of post and wire fences;
- river channel habitats including standing water important to a diverse range of flora and fauna;
- prolific archaeological remains likely to be hidden by fluvial and human activity;
- linear settlements often located at ancient bridging points established in the Saxon or medieval period; and,
- historic character of villages evident in their distinctive layout, building styles and use of Cotswolds limestone.

### Landscape Character

The broad river valleys that flow southwards to the Thames are a distinctive element of the north Cotswolds landscape. Valley sides and vegetation provide shelter and limit distant views ensuring that the valleys retain a distinctly coherent, intimate and pastoral character that contrasts strongly to the open rolling landscapes of the High Wold and High Wold Dip-Slope above.

The meandering watercourses are fringed by lush wet pastures and meadows on the floodplain, which are prone to seasonal flooding. These are bordered by a patchwork of improved pastures and arable fields that rise up onto

the gentle valley slopes. Woodlands and areas of rough grassland on steeper slopes add texture to this productive landscape, as do copses and shelterbelts associated with large parkland landscapes. Larger fields on the wide floodplain give way to medium to large fields on the valley sides.

Hedgerows and occasional stone walls form a strong boundary pattern in the landscape with drainage ditches and post and wire fencing demarcating field boundaries on wetter land.

Historically the lush, sheltered valleys would have been heavily settled and the focus of communication routes through the uplands. However, centuries of activity and natural deposition of alluvial sediment have obscured traces of earlier periods. Water meadows and ridge and furrow are important landscape features and evidence of the varied agricultural practices formerly employed in the valley up to the period of enclosure.

The distinctive character of the valley floor is in part a product of its open, unwooded character. Here, elements such as distinctive lines of pollarded willows punctuating the river channel gain visual prominence and are an important component of the floodplain landscape.

The valleys are ecologically valuable and contain a diversity of riverside habitats that support a range of species of flora and fauna. These habitats, and the rich archaeological resources are vulnerable, and their survival heavily dependant on traditional farming practices.

### Physical Influences

The Evenlode and Windrush Rivers have cut broad shallow valleys through Jurassic limestones and Lias Group mudstones as they flow south eastwards to the Thames. These valleys have uneven convex sides which tend to be steeper to the south of the river channel and generally fall from the 150m contour to the floodplain which, within the AONB generally, occurs at or close to 100m AOD.

The broad floodplains are variable in width, with wider sections occurring where the river channel meanders through the valley floor. These have formed on deep alluvial beds and are bordered by deposits of sand and gravel and gravel terraces. Significant gravel terraces may be identified above the 100m contour on the north bank of the Evenlode below Chadlington.

The valley sides of the tributary streams draining the neighbouring High Wold or High Wold Dip-Slope are generally steeper than the main valley, and have very little

flat land in the valley bottom. These all tend to flow into the main channels from the north, reflecting the influence of the Dip-Slope on the wider drainage pattern in this area.

The flat valley bottoms are prone to flooding and are traditionally species rich summer pastures and meadows. The most frequently flooded land has remained as open floodplain with few trees and hedgerows, fields largely being divided by post and wire fences. Poaching is evident in some of these areas where large herds of cattle have been set to graze in wet weather. Where these areas have been drained and cultivated, improved and semi-improved grassland is found bordered by hedgerows, and occasionally stone walls where they lie in close proximity to villages and old bridging points.

On the gentler lower valley sides a patchwork of arable, improved and semi-improved pastures are evident. Again, these are divided up by a strong network of hedges and occasionally stone walls.



Woodland cover along the main river channel is not a characteristic feature, and tree cover is restricted to pollarded willows along the course of the river and occasional small copses. These tend to be located on the slopes above the floodplain. On river banks, however, linear belts of woodland may be identified as at Worsham and ancient broadleaved woodlands on slopes above the Evenlode to the west of Long Hanborough. More extensive woodlands are associated with parkland landscapes such as Cornbury Park and Wilcote House and on steep landform bordering tributary streams such as Tangley Woods which are ancient woodlands bordering the Coombe Brook.

Key habitats include remnants of unimproved wet meadow and hay meadow grassland which owe their species diversity to high water levels and the continuity of traditional farming methods. Areas of fen and open water features such as ditches, ponds and lakes are also

important, as are hedges, woodlands and areas of calcareous grassland on steeper valley slopes and river cliffs which were created by the more powerful erosive forces of the rivers in glacial periods. Examples include Reed Hill, Stonesfield Common and Taynton Quarry, all of which are designated as SSSIs. Wet valley grasslands are of considerable ornithological importance. Curlew, lapwing, snipe and redshank are all known to breed in the area, although populations are in decline due to over stocking and from earlier, more frequent cutting of hay and silage. The switch from spring to winter cereals has also had an impact by removing nesting and feeding sites.

### Human Influences

The upper reaches of the Thames and its tributaries have been the focus of settlement for thousands of years and the appearance of the landscape has been greatly influenced by a succession of settlements from prehistoric times. Indeed it is thought that the gravel terraces of the Upper Thames tributaries provide some of the most important complexes of prehistoric settlement in Britain<sup>22</sup> and form a rich archaeological resource.

Early settlements and trade routes, which may date back to the Mesolithic, were located adjacent to the main river channel on the marshy valley floor. However, the intensity of later human activity and fluvial activity has masked these early sites with alluvium and modern settlement. Despite the low survival rate of sites within the floodplain, the high water table may contain waterlogged deposits, which can be used to research local vegetative and environmental conditions within the valleys during prehistory.

As tools and agricultural practices became more sophisticated, widespread clearance of the valley woodlands was able to take place and settlements were able to occupy the upper valley slopes. Many settlement sites were consolidated or established in the Saxon period and it is clear from the Domesday survey that many of the existing valley settlements were in place by the 11th century. Their position on dry sites on valley sides, or on free draining gravels closer to the river were chosen as they offered settlers access to a reliable water supply and to the light easily worked soils of the neighbouring uplands.

Place name evidence, such as the 'ford' in Burford and Widford, indicates that river crossings were the natural location of some settlements. The historic core of these settlements is often compact and aligned along the course

of the river indicating the limits on expansion imposed by landform, or the desire not to encroach on valuable farmland. The resultant linear settlement form is still evident as it defines the framework for many present day valley villages. Interestingly, however, Burford betrays this pattern as the extension along the High Street, dating to its heyday as a coaching stop, is at right angles to the river. This 'new street' has gained prominence over the historic core of the village, which originally lay near the church and bridge over the Windrush. Other settlements that dominate the broad floodplain valley are dispersed villages, mainly radial in form and dispersed linear hamlets. Whilst the majority of settlements are located on the valley bottom adjacent to the river, there are a number of developments on the valley sides. Individual buildings and farms are commonly found within the area with the latter often being set back from the main valley roads on the edge of the floodplain and they are reached along straight access tracks.

From the medieval period, and perhaps even earlier, the valley farmland was used for seasonal grazing and hay meadows due to the generally poor drainage and the tendency of the land to flood. It was farmed as a part of larger mixed or dairy farm enterprises. Later, and as populations increased, the pressure to maximise agricultural output grew. The advent of the water meadow system enabled river edge land to be used more intensively, resulting in an earlier crop of grass, and enabling more animals to be fed over winter. The distinctive earthworks associated with these water meadows are still evident within areas of permanent pasture.

The large open fields associated with the valley settlements would have been located on the gentle slopes above the level of floodwaters. Remnants of these may still be seen in isolated areas of ridge and furrow. These ancient fields gave way to the present dense patchwork of edges associated with Enclosure Acts from the 17th century onwards.

The rivers also have a long history as a source of energy particularly for milling, and fulling. A number of corn mills and associated features such as leats provide evidence of this, although many are now disused and converted to residences. A series of ponds to the north of Swinbrook are evidence of water management.

In more recent times there has been a move away from traditional mixed dairy and livestock farming towards intensive grassland or arable production as improvements in land drainage and flood protection have occurred<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>22</sup>. ADAS (1997) Upper Thames Tributaries Environmentally Sensitive Area Environmental Guidelines

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A higher proportion of land is now given over to arable farming in the form of winter cereal or oilseed rape production. A small number of large dairy units are also found along the floodplain and on the valley slopes; however, livestock enterprises are likely to be based on sheep or beef production rather than dairying.

Evidence of the importance of the river valleys as a communication route is confirmed by a number of castle sites, such as those at Ascott Earl and Ascott-under-Wychwood. From the earliest times the river valleys would have been a major transportation route. This has persisted into the modern day, with modern roads following the course of the river and possibly occupying the site of ancient trackways. Interestingly, main routes appear on north sides of the same valley. Narrower lanes link these main roads and cross the river at ancient bridging points.

### Character Areas

16A

#### Lower Windrush Valley



The Windrush emerges from the Vale of Bourton at Little Barrington from where it flows eastwards in a distinctive broad valley, which has an intimate and pastoral character. The valley floor is occupied by floodplain meadows and wet grasslands that are seasonally flooded, and indeed show evidence of poaching caused by overstocking in places. Pollarded willows line the course of the river, which is narrow, slow and winding. Post and wire fences are predominantly used to divide fields in the floodplain although stone walls are conspicuous in the vicinity of villages such as Asthall. At crossing points, Cotswold stone has been used to build simple bridges forming locally notable features that contribute to the local vernacular style.



Woodland within the area is limited mainly to small, scattered blocks. However, the tributary valley of the Coombe Brook feeding the River Windrush contains areas of more substantial areas of woodland planting, in particular on the lower slopes adjacent to the brook.

The gentle rolling slopes of the valley side are predominantly arable although improved pastures are also evident. Areas of semi-improved grassland are also evident on areas of steeper landform, especially in tributaries such as the Coombe Brook and the Swinbrook. The upper reaches of these are also notable for their areas of ancient broadleaved woodland.

The Windrush has a strong sense of history and the valley is rich in historic and prehistoric features. The most prevalent sites are medieval and include buildings such as the fine examples in settlements such as Burford, the church of which is a prominent landmark feature, particularly when viewed across the valley from the A40(T). Sites of medieval castles and manors, and remains of monastic buildings such as those at Minster Lovell, are also widespread and an important component of landscape character, as are the church and visible earthworks associated with the deserted medieval village at Widford.



**16B****Lower Evenlode Valley**

Unlike its upper section, the Lower Evenlode Valley forms a distinct landform unit, and despite varying in width, creates a sense of enclosure and a strong sense of place.

The valley floor has a distinct pastoral, intimate and riparian character with a close visual relationship with its enclosing valley sides along which lie a string of valley side settlements.

The overall valley form is characterised by gently sloping convex sides and a wide flat floodplain through which the river flows in a complex series of meanders. On its northern slopes, the smooth and gentle landform of the valley side is interrupted by a number of minor tributary streams that flow off the West Enstone Uplands landscape character area. To the south the valley has a gentler profile as it rises up onto the Wychwood Forest Character Area. Below Stonesfeld the valley profile is narrower, with wooded slopes bordering the river, the course of which follows a series of tight meanders, and through which the course of the Oxford to Worcester rail line cuts a direct route.

The free draining soils on the gentle valley slopes are predominantly used for arable farming although improved pastures are also evident. Fields are divided by hedgerows, except on the heavier clay soils of the floodplain where post and wire fences predominate. Here, permanent pasture is prevalent although areas of arable farmland tend to mirror the presence of the more free draining river terrace gravels as is the case to the south of Chadlington.

The Evenlode contains a string of settlements located along the valley sides, including the main settlements of Charlbury, Ascott-under-Wychwood and Chadlington. These are interspersed with numerous villages and hamlets and a dispersed pattern of large farms. Together these various forms of settlements form a well-populated area, and yet one which retains a distinct rural character.

The course of the London to Worcester rail line is a major landscape feature and a number of settlements along its route have stations. This was a significant factor in the post war expansion of the villages within the valley.

There are numerous prehistoric sites in and bordering the valley. On the neighbouring uplands, numerous barrows and prehistoric sites such as Knollbury and the Hawk Stone indicate that the valley was an important trade route and area of settlement and indeed modern roads and footpaths linking these sites to the valley may be contemporary with their construction. Perhaps the most significant prehistoric landscape feature in the valley is the small part of the Grims Ditch to the south of Charlbury. This is thought to be the boundary of an Iron Age oppidum, or tribal centre. Longer and more impressive stretches can be found beyond the AONB boundary, particularly in Ditchley Park.

Later sites of historic importance include the North Leigh Roman villa site to the south of Stonesfield and Cornbury Park, located on the eastern fringes of Wychwood Forest, both of which are located on the gentle southern slopes overlooking the river.