

## 17 PASTORAL LOWLAND VALE

### Character Areas

- 17A Vale of Bourton
- 17B Vale of Moreton



### Key Characteristics

- Extensive pastoral vale defined by the Farmed Slopes with flat or gently undulating land fringed by distinctive shallow slopes;
- generally human scale intimate landscape, but with intermittent open character and expansive views in some areas where vegetation cover is minimal, and from areas of raised landform;
- extensive drift deposits mask underlying solid geology;
- productive and verdant landscape of lush improved and semi-improved pastures;
- network of hedgerows of varying height and quality

with intermittent hedgerow trees and occasional stone walls;

- areas of wet meadow and species rich grassland bordering river channels;
- limited woodland cover including ancient woodland; and
- sparse settlement pattern.

### Landscape Character

The Pastoral Lowland Vale landscape extends into the AONB below Shipston-on-Stour, on the north-eastern fringes of the designated area. Here, low pastoral landscapes bordering the upper reaches of the Evenlode and Windrush and their many tributary streams, sit below the neighbouring uplands of the High Wold, the High Wold Dip-Slope and the Ironstone Hills and Valleys. Whilst the Vale of Bourton is entirely within the boundary of the AONB only a small proportion of the Vale of Moreton is represented, the remainder of this landscape type extending northwards where it merges into the Vale of Evesham. Therefore, descriptive text, whilst



concentrating on areas of land within the AONB boundary, takes into account particularly distinctive features of the wider expanse of the Pastoral Lowland Vale landscape to the north.



The Pastoral Lowland Vale is a soft, largely pastoral landscape with areas of unimproved grassland and wet meadow bordering streams. Land use and land cover is strongly influenced by the nature of the extensive drift deposits that cloak the underlying solid geology. The pattern of small, hedged fields and occasional stone walls, undulating landform and field, stream and hedgerow trees combine to create an intimate, human scale landscape although in areas with wide views, an open expansive character is prevalent. Views are generally limited; however, on elevated land fringing the Farmed Slopes landscape type, wide panoramas across the Pastoral Lowland Vale landscape are possible. The Farmed Slopes enclosing the vale may often be seen to stretch around the vale and form a distinct backdrop to lowland landscapes, adding to the sense of intimacy and visual unity.

Settlement of the Pastoral Lowland Vale is sparse, with a network of narrow winding lanes linking a dispersed pattern of historic towns, small villages and hamlets on areas of raised landform in the valley bottom above the level of flooding. These often date to the Saxon or medieval period and contain historic churches and may be surrounded with remnant areas of ridge and furrow. However, the largest portion of the modern landscape displays evidence of 18th and 19th century enclosure with a patchwork of neat hawthorn hedges defining large and moderately sized geometric fields.

### Physical Influences

The Pastoral Lowland Vales have an interesting and unique Glacial and Post Glacial history, which has had a profound influence on modern landscape character. During the

Ice Age a vast wall of ice in the Severn Valley trapped enormous quantities of water in the Vale of Evesham, forming a lake, referred to by geologists as Lake Harrison. Much later when the lake froze, ice advanced into the Stour Valley bringing deposits of boulder clay or till to form a moraine. The outwash fan of this Ice Age feature deposited sand, gravel and clay creating a vast, featureless plain which today extends across much of the Vale of Moreton.

Sand and gravel deposits bordering the main rivers of the Windrush and Evenlode are also evident, as are wide alluvial beds. These were deposited by rivers and streams flowing through the Vale from the surrounding uplands. They further contribute to the complex drift geology of the Vale landscape, which is so extensive that only a narrow rim of the underlying Jurassic Charmouth Mudstones of the Lias Group emerges at the lower fringes of the landscape bordering the Farmed Slopes.

In the northern part of the Vale, particularly between Shipston-on-Stour and Moreton-in-Marsh, the superficial clay has been eroded to form rounded hills and ridges between winding streams. These areas are slightly elevated and have therefore been the location of small linear settlements such as Todmarton and for the course of ancient routes such as the Fosse Way.

The gently rolling landscape of rounded slopes is dissected by numerous shallow valleys. Streams are direct and sometimes canalised and incorporate ponds or small man made lakes along their length, particularly around Bourton-on-the-Water. Due to their shallow nature and the rolling character of the landscape, their course can often only be traced by observing lines of pollarded willows and ash. The network of streams draining the surrounding uplands and the vale flow northwards via the River Stour into the Severn, and southwards via the Evenlode and Windrush into the Thames. The watershed between these catchments lies a short distance to the north of the AONB boundary around Moreton-in-Marsh. The multitude of tributary streams indicates that this low-lying landscape is subject to periodic flooding. Indeed, many of the fields are bordered by drainage ditches, with lush wet meadows and wide floodplain pastures lining watercourses.

The landscape is intensively farmed, lush improved pastures, stacks of silage bales, and a well-maintained network of low hawthorn hedges adding to the sense of a well managed and productive landscape. Arable farming is also evident, particularly on areas of elevated land where larger fields are also in evidence.

Stream-side copses and belts of trees bordering the meandering course of numerous rivers and streams offer more intimate landscapes and valuable riparian habitats. Large woodlands are not a characteristic feature. However, small and often geometric shaped broadleaved and coniferous copses may be found in the vicinity of farms. More significant broadleaved woodlands are associated with private estates such as Bruern Abbey. This was once the site of a Cistercian Abbey founded in 1147 but dissolved in 1536, of which nothing remains. The present Neo-classical house dates from 1710 to 1720 and was built of stone, most of which probably came from the ruined abbey.

### Human Influences



It is likely that early prehistoric communities, possibly resident in the valleys on the neighbouring uplands, would have exploited wetland and marginal habitats in the Vale for game and fish. From the advent of farming, however, it is likely that the gravel terraces bordering rivers may have been the focus of some settlement. Indeed Salmonsbury, a large Iron Age settlement, is located on an area of gravel to the north of Bourton-on-the-Water; a site of strategic importance for both defence and trade as it commands an important approach from the Upper Thames to the Cotswolds Hills. It is thought that there were many farming settlements in the vicinity of this major centre. However, the low, poorly drained landscape may have remained marginal up until improved plough technology in the Romano-British and Saxon periods allowed the more heavily water-logged soils to become workable.

Throughout the medieval period, pressure on land elsewhere and improved drainage techniques allowed increasing areas of the landscape to enter production. Villages expanded and new settlements were established such as Moreton-in-Marsh, which was planned in the 13th century and founded on the site of an earlier Saxon village

first recorded in 714 AD. Indeed, place name evidence indicates that the majority of modern towns and villages of the vale have Saxon origins. Interestingly, many villages were established on the freer draining land of the Farmed Slopes, possibly utilising the Pastoral Lowland Vale as seasonal pasture land or on the gravel terraces above wetland areas bordering river channels. Indeed it is primarily on the Farmed Slopes and areas of the Pastoral Lowland Vale fringing them that traces of ridge and furrow may be found, indicating that many areas of the vale were too wet for arable farming.

Where present in the Pastoral Lowland Vale, villages and hamlets are dispersed and commonly of a radial or linear form, taking advantage of isolated areas of raised landform and are frequently focused on a village pond or green. Stone, often more orange in colour than that used elsewhere in the Cotswolds, is frequently used as building material in older houses and field barns. However, brick is prevalent, a significant amount of the brick used in the landscape having been made from the local clay at a site near Paxford. The advent of the railways also influenced the availability of a wider range of materials for use in construction.

### Character Areas

#### 17A

#### Vale of Bourton

The Vale of Bourton is largely underlain by Charmouth Mudstone Formation of the Lias group. This is only exposed above the 120m contour, however, lower elevations being cloaked in thick deposits of alluvial drift bordering the main river channel and diamicton and gravel in isolated deposits and along tributaries of the Windrush.

Drift deposits have created a flat or very gently undulating landscape that shelves gently from north to south just 30m over the length of the vale. The Vale is enclosed by the Farmed Slopes landscape type, and in many areas





the additional backdrop of the High Wold, which together creates a strong sense of visual enclosure.

Landcover is primarily improved pasture although arable does become more dominant south of Bourton-on-the-Water and on areas of freer draining or raised landform. Floodplain pastures and unimproved grasslands, often enclosed by post and wire fences are evident bordering the course of the Windrush and offer contrasting textures and colours to the bright greens of pastureland elsewhere in the vale. In amongst these wet marginal areas survive mesotrophic grasslands as at Salmonsbury Meadows which are a rare example of unimproved wet grassland and rich in wild flowers such as the southern marsh orchid.

In areas where hedgerows have been recently cut back, the landscape appears neat and the patchwork of fields may be readily identified. However, in areas where hedgerows have become overgrown, the pattern of fields becomes less discernible and the landscape takes on a more wooded appearance. Such hedgerows, along with isolated trees and hedges merging with farm copses and woodlands on neighbouring slopes can lead to the impression that the landscape is more wooded than it actually is.



Settlement is sparse. The principal village settlement of the Vale is Bourton-on-the-Water, one of the most popular tourist villages in the Cotswolds. Its position on the Windrush, which flows through the town as a shallow canal and crossed by numerous bridges, has led to the town being named 'The Venice of the Cotswolds'. The River Eye, a tributary of the Windrush, is also a notable feature of nearby Lower and Upper Slaughter, their names stemming from the old English term for a wet land or 'slough' upon which they lie. Gravel extraction has been extensive to the east of Bourton-on-the Water; extraction pits now survive as a series of large lakes between the settlement and the course of the Windrush. North of Bourton-on-the-Water the Fosse Way Roman road passes through the area, linking to Stow-on-the-Wold. Beyond the AONB, the Fosse Way runs from Exeter to Lincoln.

#### 17B

#### Vale of Moreton



The Vale of Moreton is a significant vale landscape extending southwards from the Vale of Evesham where it becomes increasingly enclosed by neighbouring Farmed Slopes. Two outliers, Ebrington Hill and Meon Hill define its northern extent and act as a 'gateway' to the Vale. The southern extent of the Vale merges gradually into the Broad Floodplain Valley of the Evenlode where the river occupies a more obvious river channel.

The Vale drains into the Evenlode south of Moreton-in-Marsh and is fed by numerous narrow winding streams bordered by wet rushy pastures, which are underlain by wide alluvial beds. Beyond these, the river channel is bordered by areas of sand and gravel, silt, clay and extensive deposits of diamicton. These superficial deposits are extensive and create a flat or very gently undulating landscape.

Permanent improved pasture predominates although some arable farming is evident. Lush pastures and fields of crops are divided up by a network of hedges. These are gappy in places and boundaries reinforced by post and wire fencing. Where this has occurred, the pattern of fields is difficult to discern in the landscape, particularly where agricultural land use is the same across a number of large fields.



Woodlands are generally very small and primarily rectilinear broadleaved farm copses. Larger areas occur, at Fifield and Bledington, however, where areas of broadleaved and coniferous planting mark areas of heath and may be associated with private estates. These are particularly interesting as they contain the only areas of ancient woodlands within the AONB section of the Vale of Moreton, indicating widespread clearance of the landscape in preceding centuries.

The settlement pattern in this deeply rural, agricultural landscape is sparse and restricted to a small number of villages and hamlets linked by winding lanes. These are often linear clusters with roads and villages occupying narrow areas of raised landform often on gravel, as at Upper and Lower Oddington and areas sheltered by



embayments in the surrounding Farmed Slopes, such as Blockley and Little Compton. Larger towns such as Chipping Campden and Moreton-in-Marsh are present. Older buildings are often constructed from Cotswolds stone. As a consequence of a brick works in the area, however, there are a number of brick built houses in local towns and villages. The brickworks are located on the outskirts of Paxford, the associated chimneys forming a local landmark.

Communication routes form an important feature of the landscape, the flat and gently undulating landscape having been exploited as a route through the surrounding hills for thousands of years. The Fosse Way is perhaps the most potent historic route through the Vale although the mainline railway is equally dramatic, its course marked by linear tree belts.