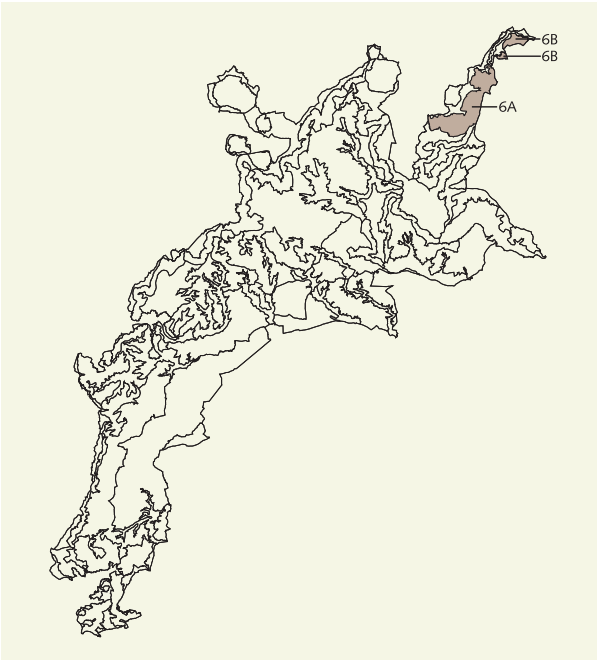
6 IRONSTONE HILLS AND VALLEYS

Character Areas

6A Whichford Hills and Valleys
6B Ratley Hills and Valleys



Key Characteristics

- **Complex topography of steeply sided convoluted valleys and rolling rounded ridgelines and hills;**
- **intermittent isolated rounded hills;**
- **mainly fertile iron-rich red-brown loams interspersed with occasional bands of calcareous soils derived from intermittent outcrops of limestone bedrock;**
- **distinctive local vernacular with buildings constructed in the 'warm' brown 'Hornton Stone' derived form the iron bearing Marlstone Rock Formation;**
- **settlement pattern of intermittent nucleated hamlets, isolated farmsteads, and individual buildings;**
- **area principally under arable cultivation, together with some improved and permanent pasture, mainly on the valley slopes and bottoms;**
- **medium to large scale regular rectilinear fields, mainly enclosed with hedgerows, with frequent hedgerow trees;**
- **limited woodland cover with exception of occasional larger stands of ancient woodland;**
- **linear network of local roads following ridgelines and dropping down into valleys to connect rural settlements; and**
- **evidence of long period of occupation of the area.**

Landscape Character

Two small areas of Ironstone Hills and Valleys Landscape Type are located in the north-eastern part of the Cotswolds AONB. The larger area extends from the perimeter of the village of Long Compton north-eastwards to Epwell and Shenlow Hill, and immediately to the east of the Edge Hill escarpment. A smaller area of Ironstone Hills and Valleys surrounds the village of Ratley and its wider setting. This is the north-eastern limit of the AONB, with the Edge Hill Escarpment forming a well-defined western and northern limit to the Ironstone Hills and Valleys. .

These fragmented sections of the Ironstone Hills and Valleys form part of a broader character area that extends eastwards beyond the AONB boundary. Through observation of the wider character area, a more informed understanding of the setting of the AONB can be gained, along with the potential effects arising from landscape change and development. To guide this understanding, the descriptions below are also applicable to the wider area of Ironstone Hills and Valleys Landscape Character Type that extends beyond the AONB.

The Ironstone Hills and Valleys comprise an upland area of rolling hills and valleys, including a number of distinctive rounded isolated hills. In common with the Oolitic Limestone that underlies the main part of the Cotswolds AONB, the underlying geology has had a profound and unifying effect on character. Here, the Lias Group rocks, and particularly the iron rich Marlstone Rock Formation, with its relatively greater resistance, has had a significant influence on the landform; it has also determined the distinctive 'red-brown' of the fertile soils. The ironstone is also an important source of building stone. Extracted over many years from quarries within the area, the warm-brown of the 'Hornton Stone' has had a unifying effect on the distinctive local vernacular throughout the villages as well as the many isolated farmhouses and barns.

This is a tranquil rural area with a generally remote character. Unspoilt Ironstone villages on upper valley slopes adjacent to spring lines, or within more sheltered valley bottoms, nestle into the folds of the landscape. The area is principally under arable cultivation but areas of pastoral landscape also occur, principally within the more secluded valley bottoms. There are some occasional larger areas of woodland, including some remnants of ancient woodland, but mainly they are confined to small plantations and copses. The principally rectilinear, medium to large-scale fields, are contained by well-maintained hedgerows with intermittent hedgerow trees.

Physical Influences

The complex topography of the area is a direct response to the differential strength and characteristics of the underlying rocks. A succession of Lias Group rocks outcrop within this north-eastern part of the AONB. Faulting and uplifting of the area has further affected the complexity of the area. For example, outcrops of Chipping Norton Limestone, and White Limestone of the Great Oolite Group are present above or in juxtaposition with older rocks of the Lias Group. Generally, however, there is a progressive succession from the mudstones of the older Charmouth Mudstone and Dyrham Formations of the Lias Group, above which lies the distinctive and harder band of Marlstone Rock. This ferruginous, sandy limestone is rich in limonite, hence the term 'Ironstone'. The elevation of much of the area is a consequence of its relative resistance to erosion; it also forms the capping to some of the hills. In other areas it is the younger Lias Group Sandstone that is the capping stone, notably on the series of small but distinctive isolated rounded hills to the north of Epwell.

The drainage of the area is of particular interest. The source of the Sor Brook, a tributary of the Cherwell, and in turn the Thames, rises in the extreme north-eastern part of the AONB, together with a series of other watercourses that eventually join Sor Brook. Within the western section of the area, however, streams flow westwards to join the Stour and Avon, and eventually into the Severn. This major watershed therefore defines the central spine of 'Middle England'.

Soils derived from the Marlstone Rock are particularly fertile producing light, iron-rich clay-loams that are excellent for corn-growing. As a result, arable production tends to be predominant throughout this farmed area.

Larger areas of woodland within the area are limited. Whichford Wood in the west of the area is of significance, both in terms of its scale and impact as a landscape feature, and its classification as ancient woodland. Other areas of woodland are generally small, rectilinear and related to planting that has taken place since the 18th and 19th Enclosure period, as well as planned and ornamental planting related to estates.

Unlike the Oolitic limestone, the local stone is less commonly used for walling and as a consequence many of the field boundaries are enclosed by hedgerows, with a mix of management regimes ranging from neatly clipped to out-grown hedges. Hedgerow trees are common, mainly Ash and Oak. Valley bottoms often support denser areas of indigenous vegetation including pollarded Willow, and stands of Alder.

Human Influences

In common with other parts of the Cotswolds, it is likely that there has been continuous human habitation within this area since the prehistoric period. The dry ridges and hills, together with the plentiful supply of water, would have been attractive to early man. Within the AONB section of this landscape type there is evidence of Iron Age occupation, eg the Nadbury Camp in the extreme northern part of the area. Beyond the AONB, a series of Iron Age camps occur further east on prominent hill tops, together with evidence of Roman occupation. Settlement of the area increased in Saxon times in response to the favourable soils, and evidence of settlements dating from this period is identifiable in place names, many of which end in 'ton'. Evidence of a mixed agricultural community during the Middle Ages is provided in the many examples of ridge and furrow that established on the open field system, such as the land immediately to the east of Winderton.

Parliamentary enclosure of the 18th and 19th centuries has had a major influence on the appearance of the landscape today. The patchwork of medium to large-scale rectilinear fields that now covers the area dates from this period. Although some field amalgamation has taken place, the distinctive regular pattern is largely unaltered. Loss of ridge and furrow has also occurred as a result of modern ploughing methods.

Settlement pattern within the area mainly comprises dispersed linear and nucleated hamlets, which for centuries have provided the focus for farming communities. Such villages were commonplace before isolated farmsteads established in conjunction with enclosure of the land. Today, many are now dormitory villages, with residents prepared to travel long distances to work in order to enjoy the peace and seclusion of these distinctive Ironstone villages. A significant number of individual buildings are also scattered throughout the Ironstone Hills and Valleys, mainly on the valley sides, although they also occur on the hill crests and ridges.

The local vernacular of the Ironstone villages is particularly distinctive. The Marlstone Rock is an important source of building stone, and gives buildings in the area a distinctive 'warm' brown colour, varied by dark olive and purple stones, and an occasional frosting caused by white lichens. Whilst displaying many of the characteristics of the Cotswolds vernacular, the colour of the building stone ensures that villages on this north-eastern sector of the Cotswolds contrast strongly with those built from the Oolitic limestone to the south and west.

Although lying outside of the AONB, the presence of a series of large scale and now mainly disused local quarries have influenced the adjacent landscape. Hornton Quarry at Edge Hill is still operational, whilst former quarries include those such as Shenington / Alkerton. For some years the Shenington / Alkerton Quarry has been used for landfill, although there is limited impact on the AONB.

Character Areas

6A
Whichford Hills and Valleys

This Character Area comprises one of the more sparsely populated sections of the Ironstone Hills and Valleys landscape type. Only a few villages are present, although there are numerous isolated farms and dwellings. The landform is a typical succession of valleys and ridges together with occasional but very distinctive isolated hills. Along the western perimeter of the area, and rising to summits of 180m AOD, Mine Hill and Windmill Hill are notable features, further emphasised by a summit transmission mast, and restored windmill, respectively. The series of rounded hills to the north of Epwell, capped by Northamptonshire Sandstone, rising to over 225m AOD are also notable, their steep summit slopes further emphasised by scrub and gorse. With the exception of the small stream that rises above and to the west of Epwell, all of the drainage is westwards to the River Stour and its tributaries.

Much of the area is arable farmland, although improved pasture also occurs together with some permanent pasture in valley bottoms. The overall character, however, is that of an intensively farmed landscape within a strong rectilinear field pattern, typical of the 'parliamentary enclosures' period. Whichford Wood is a particularly notable feature in view of the generally sparse woodland cover.

There are a number of features of historic interest. Part of the eastern boundary of the character area, and indeed the AONB, is followed by Ditchedge Lane, an ancient trackway dating back to the Neolithic Period. The section which follows the Oxfordshire/Warwickshire border forms part of The Jurassic Way, (also followed by the Macmillan Way) and provides an appropriate link to the more extensive Jurassic limestone areas within the remainder of the Cotswolds AONB beyond.

The historic Jacobean manor of Compton Wynyates is located in the northern part of the area, in a small valley below Windmill Hill. Set in a wooded parkland setting, this remarkably well-preserved house is a locally distinctive building, albeit occupying a secluded location. In the extreme west, the planned parkland landscape of Weston Park is also notable, from which there are expansive views across the Vale of Moreton towards Ebrington Hill.

6B
Ratley Hills and Valleys

The Ratley Hills and Valleys area lies close to the north-eastern tip of the AONB, extending up to the northern projection of the Edge Hill escarpment at an average upper level of 200m AOD. This small character area is in two separate sections, incorporating the slopes below the Edge Hill Ironstone Plateau area of the High Wold.

The southern section is strongly convoluted and incorporates formal planned planting and lakes associated with the Upton House Estate (National Trust).

The northern area is focused around the Ironstone village of Ratley, which extends across the upper steep valley slopes. The core of the village is constructed almost entirely in the local ironstone, and includes a medieval Motte and Bailey (SAM), which is testimony to the early origins of the settlement. Even earlier, however, is the nearby Iron Age earthwork of Nadbury Camp, which occupies a focal position above and at the northern limit of the Edge Hill escarpment. The area is dissected by a deeply incised valley within which rises the Sor Brook, a tributary of the Cherwell, and hence Thames.