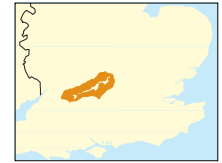


Upper Thames Clay Vales

Character Area
108



This description consists of two sub-character areas: Wiltshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Vales; Vales of the White Horse and Aylesbury.

Wiltshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Vales

Key Characteristics

- Broad belt of open, gently undulating lowland farmland on Upper Jurassic clays containing a variety of contrasting landscapes. Includes the enclosed pastures of the claylands and the wet valley bottoms and the more settled open arable lands of the gravel.
- The valley bottoms, with open floodplain landscapes displaying gravel workings and flooded pits, a regular and well-ordered field pattern, willow pollards and reedbeds along the water courses.
- The Vales in Oxfordshire are dominated by 18th century enclosure landscapes of small woods and hawthorn/blackthorn hedges. Former and current gravel workings along the Thames floodplain also include open water features. The distinctive character of Otmoor with its patchwork pattern of small fields defined by healthy hedgerows of elm add interest and variety to this area.
- In Buckinghamshire, the Vale is a predominantly pastoral landscape including regular fields within a well-defined network of trimmed hedgerows often with oak/ash hedgerow trees and some small blocks of woodland.
- Brick-built buildings within the Vales reflect the widespread use of the local clay as a building material.



MARTIN JONES/COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY

Willow pollards along the Thames Valley and other river systems are distinctive features in the area.

Landscape Character

The Wiltshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Vales form part of a larger belt of clay lowland that links the Cambridgeshire Claylands to the Avon Vales. This area consists of a broad loosely-defined clay belt of open, gently undulating lowland farmland and major river valley floodplains. The clay Vales are bounded by the limestone scenery of the Cotswolds to the north and the narrow limestone outcrop of the Midvale Ridge to the south.

Much of the Vales are of a mixed farmland character with a regular and well-ordered field pattern defined by thick hedgerows. More open floodplain landscapes are also a feature of the area, especially west of Oxford and into Wiltshire, where gravel workings and flooded pits are features in the landscape. Water courses contribute greatly to local landscape diversity with their numerous mature willow stands and pollards, and waterside reed beds.

The Oxfordshire and Wiltshire parts of the Vales are characterised by 18th century enclosure landscapes of small woods and hawthorn/blackthorn hedges. Hedgerow elms were a significant feature although these have inevitably disappeared but there are still many hedges where this species survives as a major shrub component. Former and current gravel workings along the Upper Thames

floodplain, many of which are now open water used for watersports and recreation, such as the Cotswold Water Park, are particularly characteristic of this area. Rivers and watercourses, particularly where tree-lined, are also important landscape features including the springlines which emerge from the base of the chalk escarpment. Further towards Buckinghamshire, the distinctive character of Otmoor adds interest and variety to the Vales. Noticeably devoid of settlement, Otmoor is a low patchwork pattern of small fields defined by healthy hedgerows of elm. Several distinctive villages fringe the area and are connected by a small road that skirts Otmoor itself.

Farther east into Buckinghamshire there is less arable land with pasture becoming predominant on the clay. The regular fields are bounded by a well-defined network of trimmed hedges with mature oak or ash hedgerow trees and interspersed by numerous small blocks of woodland.

Settlement within the Vale is characterised by brick-built buildings that reflect the widespread use of local clay as the principle raw building material. Nucleated villages are generally located on rising ground or confined to the raised gravel spreads above the valley bottoms. Scattered isolated 19th century farmhouses and historic parklands are a characteristic feature of the wider landscape.

Within the overall character of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Vales, much contrast and variety is provided by the pastures and hedgerows of the clay areas, the pollarded willows of the floodplains, the often hedgeless arable fields and the villages confined to the raised areas of gravel.

Physical Influences

Contained by limestone uplands to the north and by low hills and ridges to the south, the Wiltshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Vales are underlain by a great expanse of heavy blue-grey Oxford and Kimmeridge clays. The topography of the Vales is flat, although to the east the Buckinghamshire Vale is typically more gently undulating, due to the thicker surface deposits. In many places, the clay is covered locally by gravel deposits centred along the major river valleys, and marked by extensive workings and flooded pits.

The Upper Thames drains the Vale to the west before cutting south at the confluence with the lower reaches of the Cherwell through the Midvale Ridge at Oxford. Wide expanses of terraced river gravels of limestone, derived from the Cotswolds, and wide alluvial flats dominate the Oxfordshire Vale. At the confluence of the Thames with the Windrush, Evenlode and Cherwell, distinctive tabular hillocks form low isolated features within the Vale where patches of more ancient pebbly drift rest on the underlying Oxford Clay. Soils are generally yellowish brown earth, gleyed in lower lying areas. The terrace and floodplain soils

over gravel vary although west of Oxford the soils are dominantly calcareous with good drainage.

To the east, the river Ray joins the Cherwell at Islip and drains the wide basin of Otmoor where the soils are covered by a layer of peaty alluvium formed under marshy conditions before the land was drained for agriculture. The gently rising land along the northern rim to the east forms a watershed between the Ray and the river Ouse.



MARTIN JONES/COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY

This area is underlain by Oxford Clay with extensive deposits of gravel along the Thames Valley. Gravel pits have become a significant feature within the modern Vale landscape.

Historical and Physical Influences

The straight-sided large fields enclosing the Vales are typical of a 'planned countryside'. Domesday Book records little woodland cover in the 11th century with scarcely any mention of place-names relating to woodland. However, by this time, Oxford's 'ford' across the Thames was in evidence, as were the grazed water meadows at Cricklade and at Oxford. Otmoor was being used for summer and autumn grazing.

A major contrast existed between the pattern of pastures and hedgerows associated with the clays, the pollarded willows on alluvium and the hedgeless arable fields and villages confined to gravel spreads within the river valleys. Modern day evidence of the reclamation of the wetter lands exists in the occurrence of 'moor' place names in the Cotswolds Water Park area and also Otmoor. Generally the older, smaller fields are limited to land next to the rivers while the larger arable/grassland fields dominate the higher, drier ground.

The sparse settlement pattern within the Vales was more or less established by the 11th century with the upper Thames area generally quite well-populated compared to the Vale further to the east. There were occasional hamlets, farmsteads or inns near river crossing points but the settlements tended to be on the higher ground around the edges of the gravels and loams along the river valleys due to the risk of flooding. Otmoor was, as now, largely devoid of any buildings or settlement.

Significant archaeological features are visible within the Vale. These include the Roman roads such as the Ermine Way, ancient field systems evident as crop marks along gravels and remnant embankments and ditches associated with royal hunting grounds. Numerous settlement sites on gravel spreads provide evidence of continuity of settlement from the Iron Age through the Saxon and Roman period and beyond although there are virtually no Palaeolithic or Mesolithic remains due to the difficulty of cultivating the heavy clay soils before the advent of crude tools.

Otmoor's distinctive patchwork pattern of small fields and hedgerows are thought to have inspired Lewis Carroll's chess board landscape in *Alice Through the Looking Glass*.

Buildings and Settlement

The overall pattern of settlement within the Vales follows the rim of the area with villages located on rising ground or confined to the raised gravel spreads within the flood-prone lowlands. Otmoor is devoid of settlement but is fringed by several distinctive villages comprising linear developments along the small road that skirts the moor itself. Some villages are more nucleated and isolated 19th century farmhouses are characteristic of many areas.

Brick-built buildings within the Vale reflect the widespread use of the local clay as a building material with plain-tiled roofs also common. However, there are the some older stone walled and stone-slatted buildings particularly in the Oxford Vale, their character reflecting the influence of the Cotswolds to the north.

Land Cover

The Wiltshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Vales is mainly a pastoral landscape dominated by stock rearing with areas of arable in some places. There are also some areas of old unimproved hay meadows north of Oxford with more diverse flora. Wetter areas are usually under grass ranging from ley grassland to unimproved pasture or meadows. The larger arable fields in contrast tend to be restricted to the elevated gravel terraces characterised by their better drained soils. The 'chequer board' landscape resulting from the juxtaposition of the arable and grassland fields in Otmoor is a notable feature within the wider, more uniform landscape.

Woodlands are generally scarce within the Vales and historically this has been the case for many centuries. Occasional coniferous trees appear within shelter belts around buildings on the areas of higher gravels within the Vale. These drier areas which are less liable to flooding also support a thick network of hedges with oak and ash hedgerow trees. In the past, many of these hedges would have included elm. Watercourses are often marked by lines of willows or black poplar. Lush waterside vegetation forms

irregular natural boundaries in some areas, while post and wire fencing and stone walls are found in others.

There are extensive areas of flooded gravel pits around the Cotswold Water Park where recreation is now the major land use. The very flat fields contain small ponds and are typically surrounded by ditches defined by the odd willow which thrives in the wet soil conditions. Cattle graze the fields with the often moderately pronounced pattern of ridge and furrow showing an older field system.

The Changing Countryside

- Deterioration of hedgerows due to a combination of undermanagement and neglect.
- Numerous and extensive gravel workings have altered the appearance and ecology of the open floodplain landscape in many places, resulting in benefits for wildlife.
- Intensification of agricultural activities resulting in the removal of hedgerows and enlarged fields, new farm buildings and structures in the landscape and neglect of landscape features such as farm ponds.
- River canalisation and land drainage.
- Planting of poplar plantations have changed the open character of many riverside landscapes.

Shaping the Future

- Hedgerows and field margins within arable fields would benefit from conservation management.
- The restoration of river corridors and wet meadow would benefit the area.

Selected References

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Glossary

gleyed: waterlogged

Vales of the White Horse and Aylesbury

Key Characteristics

- A predominantly lowland agricultural landscape of open undulating vales.
- Mixed farming, dairy herds, hedges, hedge trees and field trees are all frequent and characteristic within the landscape. In many places, mature field oaks give a parkland feel to the landscape.
- The clays of the Vale of the White Horse support arable farming with some tracts of sheep pasture in medium sized and regular field pattern with few hedgerows or trees.
- Long views often dominated by Didcot power station and associated power lines.
- Aylesbury Vale is a continuation of the Vale of the White Horse, with a quiet, more enclosed agricultural character. Black poplar trees are distinctive features within the agricultural landscape of the Vale.
- The chalk scarp of the Chilterns and the Berkshire and Marlborough Downs form a backdrop for many views from the Vales to the south.

Landscape Character

The Vales of the White Horse and Aylesbury are low-lying undulating vales, open in character and largely dominated by agriculture, that lie below the Chalk scarps of the Chilterns and the Berkshire and Marlborough Downs to the south. To the north, the generally low ground is interrupted by the low profile of the Midvale Ridge.

Predominantly an agricultural landscape, arable fields, dairy herds, hedges, hedgerow trees and field trees are frequent and characteristic within the landscape. In many places, mature field oaks give a parkland feel. The Chalk scarp of the Chilterns and the Berkshire and Marlborough Downs is prominent in many views from the Vales to the south.

The Vale of the White Horse supports mainly arable farming with some tracts of sheep grazed pasture. The field pattern of large regular fields is associated with few hedgerows or trees. Villages such as Baulking and Goosey built around distinctive greens are located on the gravels along the river Ock valley. Contrast is provided by the fruit orchards around Harwell which thrive on the light fertile sandy soils developed over the Greensand bench at the foot of the chalk escarpment. Long views are typical within the

open landscape dominated, however, from many perspectives, by Didcot power station and its associated power lines.

Aylesbury Vale is a continuation of the Vale of the White Horse. The agricultural landscape continues over the low-lying and generally level topography of the heavy clay soils. Here, black poplar tree stands become distinctive features within the Vale. The farmed landscape is a geometric enclosure landscape of large farms set amongst large hedged fields with regular spaced hedgerow trees. In the vicinity of villages the fields are generally smaller and more irregular forming organic shapes within the wider landscape of large fields. Further contrast is provided by the river Thames which drains the Vale towards the Thames in the south west. Here, bankside willows fringe the river with flat open watermeadow landscapes adding to the interest and variety. A line of settlements from Bledlow to Wendover developed along the natural spring lines at the base of the Chilterns chalk scarp. Today, they include historic and distinctive market towns.



MARTIN JONES/COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY

Low-lying agricultural land of arable and pasture is the dominant feature in the area. The field pattern here is open, modern and large-scale with agricultural intensification leading to hedgerow loss.

Physical Influences

This area is a broad lowland valley that widens between Goring and Abingdon before becoming narrower to the east where it has a more undulating topography, typically of low ridges and small mounds.

The Vale of the White Horse in the west is a broad belt of heavy blue grey Lower Cretaceous Gault Clay with some exposures of underlying Jurassic Kimmeridge Clay drained by the river Ock and the Thames. South of Swindon, the Vale slopes gradually down from the foot of the Berkshire and Marlborough Downs Chalk escarpment to form a gently undulating clay plain, here and there broken by minor hills of Greensand or Portland Limestone. Notable Chalk hill outliers rise from the middle of the Vale near Dorchester and Cholsey.

The Vale of White Horse passes eastwards into the Aylesbury Vale. Here, the wide unbroken valley is dissected by alluvial flats and low river gravel terraces around the confluence of the Ock and the Thames. Farther east into the narrower Aylesbury Vale, sandy brown earths – developed from the ledge of Greensand below the Chalk scarp of the Chilterns – provide some of the most productive soils in the area. Aylesbury Vale is drained by the river Thames and by numerous independent streams that flow south-west into the Thames. Where drainage is impeded along river courses, the underlying gleyed brown earths give rise to wet meadows.



MARTIN JONES/COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY

Large hedgerow trees remain important elements in the Vale landscape.

Historical and Cultural Influences

In Neolithic times, numerous tribes colonised the river terraces downstream from Radley and ancient field systems are visible as cropmarks in the Thames gravels. Around Aylesbury the deserted villages, such as Quarrendon, Fleet Marston and Creslow, are also significant historic landscape features from medieval times.

Dorchester, on the Thames, was a Roman frontier post in defence against the Belgic tribes. The Romans laid down numerous roads to aid the conquest and later to act as trade routes connecting the settlement of Dorchester with wider areas. Although not visible today, groups of Roman farms were concentrated on the better draining loams of the gravel terraces along the river valleys, in particular the Thames. In contrast, the routes of Roman roads are still significant visual features in the modern-day road pattern.

The Domesday survey showed that the most densely populated part of the area was the dense narrow belt of spring-line villages on the Greensand at the foot of the Chilterns in Aylesbury Vale. Many of these settlements survive as historic market towns along the ancient route of the Lower Icknield Way. Much of this prehistoric trackway runs along the Greensand ledge.

Some of the earliest regional parliamentary enclosures were in the Vale, as descriptions of the Vale of the White Horse by Celia Fiennes indicate, ‘it extends a vast way, a rich enclosed country’. The rate of parliamentary enclosure reached a peak in the second half of the 18th century as farmers responded readily to the new ideas of farm husbandry coming from neighbouring Berkshire and from Norfolk. Dairy farming developed rapidly within the Vale as new farming methods increased productivity from the rich clay soils. The predominant field pattern of large hedged fields, which is still present, dates from this time.

Villages that were slow to develop have remained small and retained their early settlement layout and old buildings. Aylesbury is the only town of any size, growing partly from its trade in Aylesbury ducks.

Buildings and Settlements

Springline towns and villages at the foot of the Chalk scarps are a characteristic feature of the Vales. Elsewhere, risk of flooding along the river valleys, such as the Thames, has resulted in a more sparse settlement pattern. Largely located on raised gravel patches, these numerous nucleated village settlements are often found centred around village greens with churches as focal points. The typical brick and plain-tiled buildings in the villages and hamlets have used the bricks originating from the numerous local clay quarries and brickworks.

Many buildings traditionally made use of ‘wichert’, a chalky marl mixed with straw, to plaster walls which were then often colour-washed. For example, the long curved walls and small windows of the buildings of Haddenham and Cuddington are of such construction. Villages located on the broad ledge of Greensand below the Chilterns were rarely built of the local sandstone. However, the use of chalk blocks or ‘clunch’ quarried from the Chalk hills to the south, together with thatch in some roofs, adds considerable interest and variety to the local scene. Notable buildings within the Vales include the Rothschild palaces at Mentmore, Aston Clinton and Halton.

Land Cover

The area has both pastoral and mixed farming regimes. The medium sized, regular shaped fields are largely improved grassland and arable with numerous wet meadows along the river terraces. The fields of the clay plains are cultivated up to the edge of each hill spur, until the paler earth of the Chalk is reached. Fields are enclosed by thick hedgerows with trees. Willows line the meandering course of the river channels such as the Thames. West of Aylesbury, the Vale is characterised by some small woods and tree clumps while, in contrast, to the east there are fewer woods and a notable concentration of orchards on the Greensand.

Industrial activities at Abingdon and Didcot, and in particular the power station, visually dominate much of the open agricultural character of the Vale landscape. Further variation in land cover is provided by the fruit orchards along the Greensand ledge below the Chalk downs which introduce local contrast and variety.

The Changing Countryside

- Loss of hedgerows to field enlargements.
- Large dominating developments and structures in the flat landscape such as Didcot Power Station and associated pylon lines.
- Pressures from new roads and road improvements.
- Localised recreation pressures.

Shaping the Future

- New woodland planting should be considered in many parts of the area. Trees – particularly the black poplar – are important landscape features.
- Many hedgerows are in need of restoration and replanting.

Selected References

Richards Moorehead and Laing Ltd, (1989), *Buckinghamshire Trees and Forestry Strategy: Volumes 1, 2 and 3*, Richards Moorehead and Laing, Clwyd.

Reed, M (1979), *The Buckinghamshire Landscape*, Hodder and Stoughton, London.

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The open floodplain of the Vale in Oxfordshire creating a flat 'chequer board' agricultural landscape with occasional small woods and hedgerows.