

# Vale of Mowbray



## Key Characteristics

- Low-lying agricultural landscape contained by the escarpment of the North Yorkshire Moors and Cleveland Hills to the east and the undulating slopes and valleys of the Yorkshire Dales to the west.
- Divided from the Tees Lowlands to the north by glacial deposits forming a minor watershed.
- Underlying Triassic sandstones and mudstones, blanketed by thick layers of glacial boulder clay (till) with subdued moraines and ridges of sand and gravel.
- More varied topography than the Vale of York with areas of rolling, undulating hills as well as flatter land.
- Fertile agricultural land used for arable crops and permanent grassland.
- Fields of a medium scale enclosed by low hedgerows with scattered, small areas of woodland and some parkland.
- Low-lying river valleys meandering through flood plains which become broader to the south where they traverse flat, glacial, lake deposits.
- Villages situated on higher ground, often with a linear form along a wide main street, and churches providing local landmarks.
- Buildings generally of brick of varying colour with pantiles for roofs.
- Influence of military installations and major transport routes especially the A1, the A19 and the York to Edinburgh main railway line.

## Landscape Character

The Vale of Mowbray is similar to the Vale of York but is distinguished by the relative containment offered by the prominent scarp of the North Yorkshire Moors and Cleveland Hills to the east and the more gentle foothills of the Pennine Dales to the west. From within the Vale there are always views out to these masses of higher

ground. At the Vale fringes the hills also offer a real sense of enclosure.



J. HERBERT/COUNTRYSIDE COMMISSION

The Vale retains significant tree cover as well as areas of permanent grassland. The mixed land cover together with some areas of rolling, undulating hills, brings important variation to the landscape.

Within the Vale the landscape is essentially flat or gently undulating. There is slightly more varied land form to the east, where the land begins to rise to the moors, and in the low undulations between river valleys. Low ridges and knolls occur in places and appear quite prominent above the flatter land around them. They are formed from fault-bounded outcrops of the underlying rocks' morainic material or ridges of sand and gravel. The soils of the Vale, formed from glacial deposits, are generally quite fertile and now support predominantly arable farming, although there is also permanent pasture. Fields are medium in size but become larger towards the south and west.

There is variation in the character of the farmed landscape resulting from both changes in topography and differences in land cover. Some areas have significant woodland cover and substantial hedgerows many of which are thick and well-maintained. These landscapes appear quite enclosed especially when combined with more varied topography. Elsewhere fields are large, woodland limited, hedges low-cut and gappy with fences increasingly taking their place and hedgerow and field trees are widely scattered. This creates an open, simple landscape especially in the flat areas of the Vale.

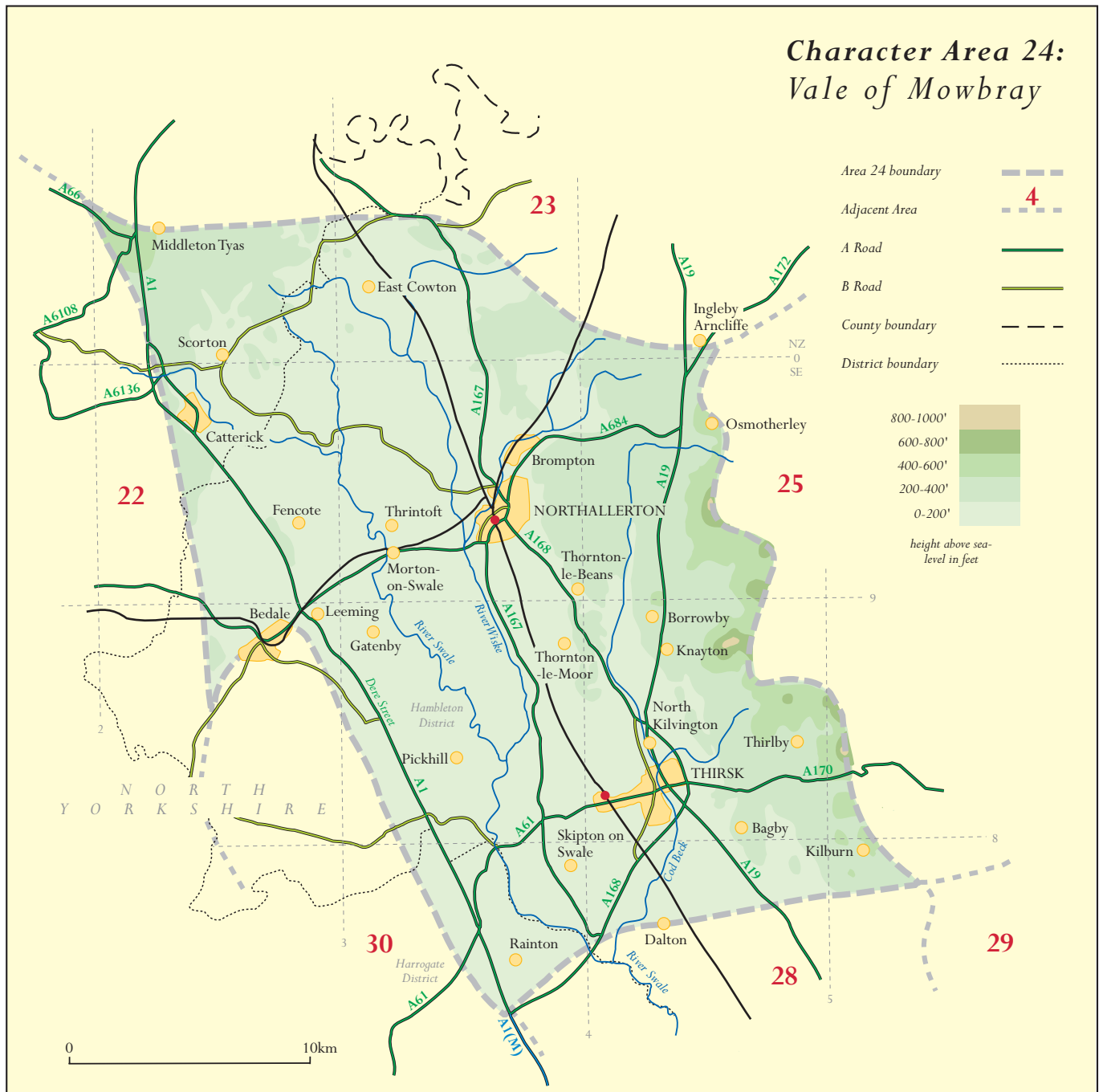
The Vale of Mowbray is crossed by the river Swale and its tributaries the Wiske and the Cod Beck. The valleys of these watercourses are quite narrow in the north of the Vale but are nevertheless significant in the landscape. Characteristically they are tree-lined and fringed by a belt of rough pasture or scrub. Further south the flood plains open out and are intensively cultivated. The rivers themselves are here often contained within embankments although sometimes the river meanders naturally within its channel, depositing gravel banks and having a fringe of riverine vegetation. These more southerly stretches of river are sometimes cultivated right up to the bank and sometimes fringed by trees and scrub.

Other more scattered elements also contribute significantly to the overall character of the Vale. Parkland landscapes occur in a number of locations and contribute to the extent of tree cover especially where they coincide with areas

which still retain moderate hedge, hedgerow tree and woodland cover. There are also both active and redundant airfields. They are usually in quite open areas and the associated structures of roads, runways, fences, sheds, hangars, control towers, and new industrial uses can be highly visible. Finally, the Vale provides a major transport corridor and contains a section of the A1, the A19 from Thirsk to Teesside and the main London to York to Edinburgh railway line.

**Physical Influences**

Soft Triassic sandstones and mudstones form the main bedrock to the Vale of Mowbray but Jurassic mudstones and sandstones are present in isolated faulted ridges in the east and where the ground rises to the foot of the North York Moors. At the margin of the North York Moors, Lake



Gormire, one of the few lakes in Yorkshire is impounded in a glacial hollow formed in the surrounding rock by erosion marginal to the Vale of York ice-sheet.

Glacial deposits, dating mainly from the last glaciation, are the main influence on the landscape of the Vale. Thick glacial till blankets the area and forms a slightly elevated bench when it laps onto the lower flanks of the moors to the east. Subdued ridges of glacial till form weak arcuate moraines and lines of drumlinoid hills across the Vale. Well-developed ridges of sand and gravel (eskers) occur with a trend parallel to the Vale especially in the southern part of the area. Here, glacial lake deposits fill in around the glacial topography and present large flat expanses of heavy clay soil punctuated with flat expanses of light sandy soil. The glacial topography controlled the courses of the present river drainage, restricting the rivers to narrow floodplains in the north and allowing them to meander widely across the flat area of lake deposits in the south.

### Historical and Cultural Influences

Due to the intensive agriculture in the area, archaeological remains are not as apparent in the Vale as they are in the surrounding uplands. It is also likely that the clay soils supported dense forest and that the rivers were prone to widespread and regular flooding so this would not have been a favoured area for settlement in the earliest times. Nevertheless, like the other vale areas to the south, it is probable that the Vale of Mowbray was, before the 18th century, a mix of common pastures, open fields and earlier enclosure. Drainage, flood control and parliamentary enclosure then shaped much of the present agricultural landscape and introduced the pattern of scattered, imposing, brick-built farmsteads and shelter belts.



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The main London to Edinburgh railway line, seen here near South Otterington, is one of several vital north-south infrastructure links which are channelled through the Vale of Mowbray by the high land to east and west. The main towns have evolved in response to the transport role.

The position of the Vale between two prominent areas of upland has meant that it has always been an important transport corridor. The Romans constructed north-south roads through the Vale and these routes are on the approximate line of the modern trunk roads linking the north and south. The main towns have also evolved in response to this transport role. Northallerton, for example, has Roman origins but developed substantially to service coaching routes in the 18th and early 19th century and then expanded with the opening of the railway in the 19th century.

Other key influences have included hunting and field sports which led to the introduction of numerous small blocks of woodland, planted as game coverts, many of which still make an important contribution to the landscape today. Defence requirements in the second world war led to the establishment of the large number of airfields in the Vale, notably Leeming, Sandhutton, Topcliffe and Dishforth. They are prominent within the Vale and, as some become redundant, the alternative uses to which they are put are bringing change to the rural surroundings.



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The Vale contains productive arable land as well as some areas of more mixed farming. Hedges and hedgerow trees are important, as are the woodlands which form a more significant component of the landscape here than they do in the Vale of York to the south.

### Buildings and Settlement

Northallerton, the county town of North Yorkshire, and Thirsk are the main towns in the Vale of Mowbray. Beyond these, settlement is generally concentrated on the high ground, out of reach of the floods which would once have affected the river valleys. Villages are frequently of a linear form, running along roads with buildings often facing each other and set back behind broad grass verges across a wide main street. It is common for long rear plots to be associated with the houses in these villages with access

provided via back lanes. Village greens are common though they do not occur in all villages. All these features, combined with mature trees and other traditional features, create very attractive rural villages with an unmistakable vale character. Churches within the villages have either towers or spires which provide prominent landmarks visible for miles around in this generally open landscape.

Farmsteads are dispersed throughout the Vale with many dating from the Parliamentary enclosure period. They stand prominently in open country sometimes contained by planted shelter belts.

The buildings in the Vale are constructed mainly of brick and pantile and, indeed, the underlying clays have supported brickworks in the area at various times. Earlier bricks, made up to the early 17th century, are a warm red colour while those from the later 17th century onwards become lighter red or red brown. Bricks from the 19th and early 20th century have a distinctive mottled pink and light brown appearance and are apparent in many buildings in the area. Minor variations in traditional building styles occur where the brick is rendered, mainly in the north of the area, and where brick courses are mixed with cobbles from the glacial deposits and from rivers.

### Land Cover

Land cover within the Vale is relatively simple. A great deal of the agricultural land is in arable production although substantial areas of grassland remain. There are also riverine meadows along the main river corridors. These are sometimes narrow, unmanaged and scrubby but are broader where the valleys open out to the south. Farming systems are quite mixed with dairy farming and cropping the most common but some mixed farms, pig farms and poultry farms are also present. Woodland cover is more prominent here than in the more open vales to the south although even here much has been lost. Many are small game coverts, shelter belts around farms and plantations. Semi-natural deciduous woodland is limited but there are some areas alongside the rivers, for example Landmoth Wood above the Cod Beck east of Northallerton. Parkland landscapes contribute to the tree cover in some local areas and in some parts of the Vale, especially along the ridges to the east, hedgerows and hedgerow trees are reasonably intact and create a relatively enclosed character.

### The Changing Countryside

- The Vale of Mowbray has changed substantially as a result of intensification of agriculture with the overall effect that it is becoming more similar to the very open arable landscape of the Vale of York to the south. Hedges and hedgerow trees have been lost and grassland

converted to arable use. Losses may have slowed but the overall trend seems likely to continue.

- With large areas of arable land present set-aside is also now beginning to have an effect on the farmed landscape.
- Where parklands contribute to local character, change in estate management practices has an effect sometimes leading to decline in the condition of parkland features.
- Development pressures have also affected the Vale and continue to do so.
- Pressures for housing and industry around towns and along main road corridors.
- Requirements for new housing in rural villages leading to the introduction of non-vernacular buildings and the loss of the traditional village plan.
- Alternative, often industrial, uses of redundant airfields affecting open landscapes.
- Road improvements to major trunk roads and development of service areas.
- Introduction of a new pylon line across the Vale.



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The Cod Beck, seen here near Sigston, and the river Wiske flow into the river Swale. In the north, the river valleys are characteristically tree lined and fringed by riverine meadows. Further south the floodplains open out and are intensively cultivated.

### Shaping the Future

- Enhancement opportunities may arise in relation to restoration of the limited areas of sand and gravel working in the river valleys and from schemes to introduce more sympathetic river management or possibly to restore more natural river character in areas which have been highly engineered.

- There is scope for a comprehensive approach to securing active management of the many areas of small woodland.
- Where hedges and hedgerow trees have declined, hedgerow restoration and planting may be appropriate to improve wildlife habitat and strengthen landscape structure.
- Integrated approaches to management of areas around important heritage sites, which are popular with visitors, may also be appropriate.
- To reverse the loss of grassland in the Vale, opportunities need to be explored to encourage the conservation of existing grassland and the reversion of arable land to pasture.



ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGES/JOHN MORRISON

The Vale is framed to the west by the rising ground of the Pennines and to the east by the North Yorkshire Moors and Cleveland Hills. In places, the transition between characters is sharply defined. Here, the arable land of the Vale is seen from Sutton Bank in the North Yorkshire Moors and Cleveland Hills.

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## Glossary

*esker*: long, narrow, sinuous ridge, usually sand and gravel, deposited by stream flowing under former glacier or ice-sheet