

Vale of York



Key Characteristics

- Low lying, generally flat or gently undulating land, crossed by obvious ridges formed by the York and Escrick glacial moraines.
- Underlain by glacial deposits resting on Triassic sandstone and mudstone and Lower Jurassic mudstone to the east.
- Floodplains of several major rivers notably the Ouse, the Derwent and the Wharfe, but also the Ure, Nidd and Foss.
- Washland and hay meadows in the river floodplains.
- Medium- to large-sized open fields intensively cultivated for arable crops but with some dairy farming.
- Low, flailed, intermittent hedges forming field boundaries with sparse, scattered hedgerow trees.
- Scattered small woods, with more extensive conifer plantations on sandy soils, together creating an impression of wooded farmland in some areas.
- Remnants of heathland commons on sandy soils.
- Distinctive character of settlements, especially the linear villages with buildings set back behind wide grass verges.
- Distinctive mottled brick used in buildings, combined with pantile roofs.
- Scattered, large, brick-built farmsteads.
- Focus on city of York with roads radiating from the city and York Minster providing a focal point visible in views from the surrounding area.

Landscape Character

The Vale of York is a transitional vale landscape marking the change from the more varied topography and mixed farming of the Vale of Mowbray to the north, to the flat, open land of the Humberhead Levels to the south. It is a

broad area which is bounded by the ridge of Magnesian Limestone which rises to the west and by the Howardian Hills and the Yorkshire Wolds to the east. The low ridge of the Escrick Moraine, which trends to the north-east, marks the southern limit and the transition to the Humberhead Levels.



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The major rivers which cross the Vale of York are one of its most important characteristics. The Swale, seen here near Helperby, joins the Ure, changes name to the Ouse and flows through York before crossing into the Humberhead Levels to the south and joining the Humber Estuary.

This is a low-lying, mainly flat landscape though minor ridges and glacial moraines provide subtle local variations in topography. There are also frequent stream courses and drainage channels which link with the main rivers which cross the Vale. The floodplains of the Ouse, the Derwent, the Ure, the Nidd and the Fosse create much of this flat landscape.

The soils, formed from glacial till, sand and gravel are generally fertile and the majority of the land is in arable use with extensive areas of wheat, sugar beet and potatoes. Fields are medium to large size and enclosure is by low, flailed often intermittent hedges with few hedgerow trees. This gives the landscape a generally large-scale, open, well-tended character where production is the main emphasis of land





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York is the main settlement in the Vale and tends to dominate the area both economically and physically. The Minster, built from stone brought in from the Southern Magnesian Limestone ridge to the west, is a prominent landmark drawing the eye to the city from much of the surrounding countryside.

Physical Influences

As with the Vale of Mowbray to the north, the solid geology of the Vale of York comprises Triassic sandstone and mudstone and Lower Jurassic mudstone and is completely cloaked by varied drift deposits. They include glacial till, which forms a marked bench in the east, sand and gravel as well as both terminal and recessional moraines left by the ice-sheet. The York Moraine forms a curving ridge extending from York eastwards to Sand Hutton. The Escrick Moraine has a similar trend and lies about 8 km to the south. The northern section of the Vale is underlain by deposits of clay, sand and gravel left by a glacial lake formed just north of the Humberhead lake as the ice-sheet stagnated. The main rivers and streams also laid down river alluvium consisting of clay, silt and sand. These lacustrine and alluvial deposits provide good loamy soils, while the clays are calcareous and have sometimes been used for liming other soils. The glacial till bench along the eastern fringe of the Vale, at the foot of the adjoining Howardian Hills, creates more varied topography in this area and provides a transition to the hills beyond.

Historical and Cultural Influences

It seems probable that, even before the coming of the Romans, the drier land in the Vale, away from the river valleys would have been extensively cleared for pastoral farming and small-scale cropping and contained some dispersed settlement. The Romans established a legionary fortress at what was to become the major Roman centre of Eboracum, now York, using the higher ground of the York Moraine where it was directed by the then tidal river Ouse. The area around was significantly influenced by the Romans, with evidence of forts and signal stations as well as roads. Commons, often of a heathy character, were widespread in the Vale and some of these still survive today on the poor, wind-blown, sandy soils. Open

fields also persisted in some areas until enclosure in the 18th century. There was, however, quite widespread enclosure of both common pastures and open fields before the 18th century. Parliamentary enclosure completed the process and there was then widespread improvement of farmland by draining and marling.

In earlier centuries wheat and rye were the main crops grown, often together on the sand land, and large areas of grassland also remained. Crops such as potatoes and carrots were only introduced early in the 20th century. The second world war saw a reduction in livestock and an increase in deeper ploughing and use of fertiliser became more apparent. Since then there has been further progressive intensification of farming, with only the sand lands being resistant to improvement because of their tendency to blow and their requirements for high levels of fertiliser inputs.

Buildings and Settlement

York is the main settlement in the Vale and tends to dominate the area around it, both economically and physically. It is a magnificent historic city and all the main roads in the Vale radiate from it. The Minster, built from stone brought from the Southern 'Magnesian Limestone' ridge to the west, is a highly visible landmark drawing the eye to the city from many of the outlying areas. The city is expanding around the fringes and there are also significant satellite villages like Upper and Nether Poppleton and Haxby to the north and Bishopthorpe and Copmanthorpe to the south.



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A low lying, generally flat or gently undulating vale of medium to large-sized fields, intensively cultivated for arable crops. Hedges tend to be low and gappy, as seen here at Cundall, and woodland cover is generally low, although there are some conifer plantations.

Easingwold is a substantial rural town lying in the north of the Vale and has a distinctive intricate layout and a fine combination of open spaces, buildings and landscape features. The villages, like those in the Vale of Mowbray,



Farmsteads are often large, indicating agricultural prosperity dating from the 19th century. They are built, like most of the traditional buildings in the vicinity, in characteristic mottled bricks with pantile roofs.

exhibit the typical linear vale form of mottled brick houses with pantile roofs facing each other on either side of a main street. Wide grass verges and special features like village greens, ponds, streams and mature trees often combine with the village church and pub to create a very attractive whole. Farmsteads are larger here than in the more northerly Vale of Mowbray, with examples of the more prosperous agriculture dating from the 19th century. They are built, like most of the traditional buildings in the vicinity, in the characteristic mottled bricks and have pantile roofs. Older farmhouses are usually associated with a complex of large, more modern farm buildings.

Land Cover

Arable land is by far the most prominent land cover throughout the vale and grass is now relatively infrequent. This reflects the steady move away from livestock rearing and dairy farming. There are few flood meadows left along the river valleys although some still remain along the Derwent, primarily in its lower reaches.

The sand lands support substantial areas of remnant heaths and semi-natural, often ancient, deciduous woodland some

of which is common land. There are also large areas of conifer plantation, as well as small farm woods, shelterbelts and game coverts, all of which add diversity and interest to the landscape. This is particularly important because hedges and hedgerow trees have been in decline and the landscape is becoming more open.

The remaining semi-natural habitats, including heathland, water meadows, pastures, riversides, wetlands, small woodlands and hedgerows are all of great importance for nature conservation.

The Changing Countryside

- Agriculture has made a positive contribution to the character of the area but, more recently, intensification of farming has had a significant effect on the landscape and has led to loss of hedges and hedgerow trees, a decline in the condition of those that remain and the loss of unimproved grassland. This continues to make the landscape more open with larger fields and fewer trees.
- Use of fertilisers is leading to eutrophication of the rivers and pollution of ground water while pressure for water

abstraction is leading to low flows in streams and general lowering of the water table. River management operations have led to loss of riverside trees, and flood meadows have largely been lost to agricultural improvement.

- Development pressures are significant around York where there is a particular demand for housing especially in nearby villages. Schemes for substantial residential development continue. Many of the rural villages are attractive to commuters which can create demands for new development and emphasises the need to protect their special character.
- Road building and enhancement schemes are also having an effect and there is particular pressure for golf course and driving range development and for the establishment of garden centres in rural areas. The volume of traffic in the area, especially visitor traffic to York and to the coast, has had a significant impact on the tranquillity of the landscape.

Shaping the Future

- There may be scope to enhance this landscape by attempting to create new, larger areas of heathland on appropriate areas of sandy soil.
- New tree planting should be appropriate to the history of the Vale and its particularly open character. Management of the existing, scattered, farm woodland should be addressed. The historic Forest of Galtres provides a good opportunity for interesting woodland planting.
- There is scope for progress in enhancing the riverine landscape by integrated approaches to catchment and river corridor management.
- Where hedges and hedgerow trees have declined, restoration and replanting may be appropriate to improve wildlife habitat and to strengthen landscape structure.
- Appropriate design of new development would ensure that the character of settlements is enhanced.

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The village of Sutton-on-the-Forest lies to the north of York. It is typical of Vale villages, which tend to be linear in form, with mottled brick and pantile roofed homes facing each other across a broad main street. Wide grass verges and special features like village greens, ponds, streams and mature trees often combine with the village church and pub to create very attractive settlements.

Glossary

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

eutrophication: the process of becoming over-rich in nutrients