

# Arden



## Key Characteristics

- Well-wooded farmland landscape with rolling landform.
- Ancient landscape pattern of small fields, winding lanes and dispersed, isolated hamlets.
- Contrasting patterns of well-hedged, irregular fields and small woodlands interspersed with larger semi-regular fields on former deer parks and estates, and a geometric pattern on former commons.
- Numerous areas of former wood-pasture with large, old, oak trees, often associated with heathland remnants.
- Narrow, meandering river valleys with long river meadows.
- North-eastern industrial area based around former Warwickshire coalfield, with distinctive colliery settlements.
- North-western area dominated by urban development and associated urban edge landscapes.

## Landscape Character

Arden comprises farmland and former wood-pasture lying to the south of Cannock Chase and Cank Wood. Traditionally regarded as the land lying between the river Tame and the river Avon in Warwickshire, the Arden landscape also extends into north Worcestershire to abut the Severn and Avon Vales. To the north and north-east it presents a steep escarpment to the open landscape of the Mease/Sence Lowlands. The eastern part abuts and surrounds Coventry, beyond which lies the similarly well-wooded farmland and remnant heathlands of Dunsmore and the more open farmland of the Feldon, with the Cotswold scarp beyond. To the south lies the prosperous agricultural, horticultural and orchard lands of the Avon valley. Within the overall character, there is wide variation which ranges from the enclosed river valleys, through the undulating wooded landscape and small hedged fields of the main plateau, to the remains of the coal industry in the north-

east. Surviving features include sprawling settlements of urban fringe character with red-brick terraced housing, spoil heaps and small pockets of rather run-down pasture and arable farmland.



ANNE SMITH/WARWICKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Well hedged, small scale irregular fields and small woodlands characterise the ancient Arden landscape and contribute to the sense of unity.

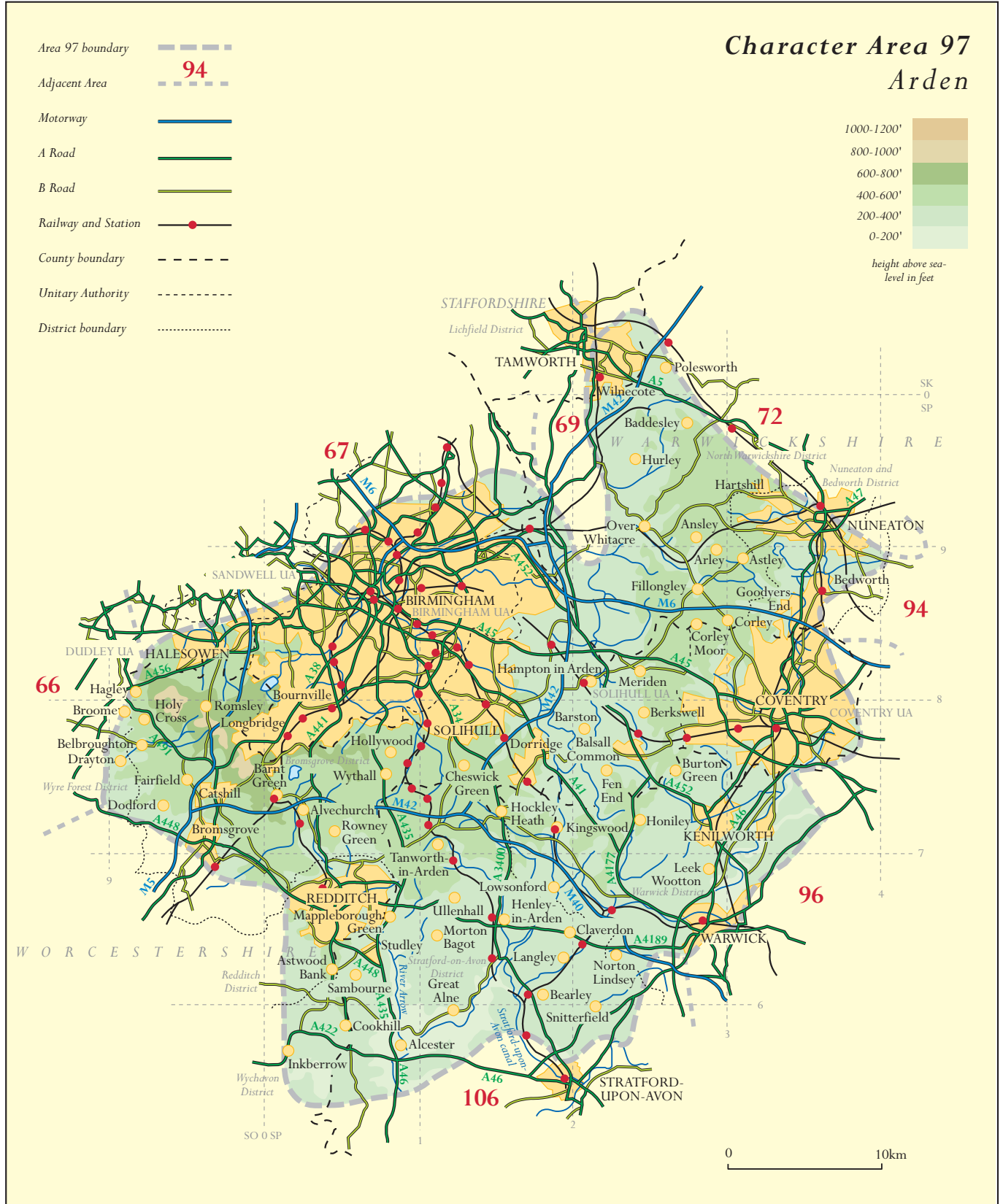
There are few dramatic physical features but the Arden countryside has a strong sense of unity. Brick and timber are common building materials throughout the area and the many hamlets and farmsteads are a happy fit to their surroundings. The characteristic placename elements of *end* and *green* indicate their origin on and around former commons. This is Shakespeare's 'Forest of Arden', historically a region of woodlands and heaths, which today remains one of the more wooded parts of the region. There are many mature hedgerow oaks, numerous patches of ancient woodland and parks containing remnants of wood-pasture. The association with former common and heathland also imparts a strong unity, reflected by the widespread occurrence of heathland vegetation and roadside bracken. The larger commons have been enclosed within a rectilinear pattern of larger fields, straight roads and hedges, but there are still smaller commons as well as extensive areas of farmland, characterised by small, irregular fields, dense, thick hedges, winding lanes and trackways.

At the core of the area is a small-scale intricate landscape of low, rounded hills, steep scarps and small incised valleys which, with the abundant tree and woodland cover, give a

strong sense of enclosure with views often being severely restricted. Narrow, frequently sunken, lanes link scattered farms and hamlets built of brick and timber. An ancient landscape is apparent in the moated sites, older buildings, small parks, fragments of heathland and wet pasture and, perhaps above all, in the broad, spreading oaks of hedges, commons and pasture woodlands. To the north-west, around the southern edge of Birmingham, there is a change to a landscape of parliamentary enclosure with regular,

rectilinear fields, long straight roads and gently rolling pasture which is often horse grazed. Unlike the rural core, post-war residential development at places like Hockley Heath and Earlswood has had a considerable influence on the landscape.

In contrast to the enclosed character of much of the area, Arden also contains bands of wooded estate lands on the more gently rolling landforms with large hill-top woodlands and arable fields. Hedges and hedgerow trees have much



less significance than elsewhere and nucleated villages are the typical settlement. Some have now grown as commuter settlements. Deer parks were once common in the area and there is still an ancient wooded appearance to these sites. A more distinctly parkland character is found particularly between Wroxall and Stoneleigh and in the lower Blythe valley. The land here is generally flat emphasising the importance of the woodland and parkland trees. The woods themselves vary from ancient to geometric 20th century plantations. Some parklands such as Arbury Berkswell remain largely intact while at places like Packington and Stoneleigh there are the remains of older deer parks.

Threading through all of these landscapes, the river valleys are more fertile and enclosed. They are typically rather narrow and meandering, with long river meadows on the floodplain, riverside pollards, alders and blocks of scrub as well as the remains of mills, pools and leets. Arable farmland extends into the more fertile southern river valleys and elsewhere.

To the north-east the landscape is primarily industrial and residential and the legacy of mining activities is strong. There are modern housing estates and small industrial units which, in many cases, form part of the urban fringe of the larger industrial towns and cities to the east. Golf courses, playing fields and, around Hartshill, quarrying are conspicuous. Nevertheless the area contains a significant proportion of varied and often-steeply sloping farmland and woodland. Much of the latter has developed on old colliery spoil sites and is of nature-conservation value. Mining subsidence at Alvecote has produced a complex series of wetlands.

Birmingham has a clearly-defined concentric pattern of development. Much of the landscape is dominated by 19th and 20th century housing, the former in characteristic red brick. Canals, parks, golf courses and the river corridor form the main open spaces, with a substantial parkland area around the University at Edgbaston and some low-density garden suburbs like Bournville. Enclosed within the urban area are fragments of older landscapes like Castle Bromwich Park.

### Physical Influences

The northern and central parts of the area lie across the eastern part of the Birmingham plateau, which comprises two uplifted blocks of older Palaeozoic strata, the South Staffordshire Coalfield and the Warwickshire Coalfields. These are separated by an area of Triassic rocks, the Knowle Basin, which is mostly covered by glacial drift. The central area (Knowle Basin) is lower lying than the adjacent Palaeozoic area and is largely underlain by Mercia Mudstones and covered by glacial sands, gravels or till. This gives rise to a gently rolling landform, cut by the river Blythe and its tributaries. Alluvium and river terrace deposits have been extensively worked for aggregates along many of the river valleys.



ROB COUSINS/COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY

Narrow alluvial flood plains with boundaries marked by prominent sinuous hedgelines. These river meadows, often with riverside trees, create a strong sense of place and a feeling of naturalness.

The eastern area is a dissected plateau consisting of uplifted Carboniferous and older Palaeozoic and 'Precambrian' rocks, rising to 180 m AOD near Corley. Most of the plateau is occupied by Upper Carboniferous red mudstone and sandstone, fringed to the north and east by the Coal Measures of the Warwickshire Coalfield. Cambrian and Precambrian rocks form narrow outcrops along the north-eastern edge of the plateau, where they are faulted against Triassic strata to present a steep scarp towards the Mease/Sence Lowlands. The Carboniferous rocks are cut off sharply to the west by a boundary fault which produces a pronounced edge to the plateau adjacent to the Tame and Blythe valleys. The plateau slopes away gradually to the valleys of the Avon and Sowe rivers, where the interfluvies are mostly covered by river terrace deposits and glacial drift.

The southern part of the area is underlain by Mercia Mudstones, with outcrops of Arden Sandstone forming prominent escarpments. Glacial features occur to the south-east and south-west, the latter including the Ridgeway, a flat-topped glacial ridge running along the Warwickshire/Worcestershire county boundary.

Light, sandy soils predominate in the north. Heavier clay soils and loams occur extensively in central and southern Arden. The poorer sandy soils are acidic and, when cleared of woodland, often became leached, giving rise to heathland vegetation. On the heavier soils, woodland clearances were usually succeeded by the development of pasture grasslands and wood-pasture. Marshy lands occur on the more fertile alluvial clays and loams of the river valleys. The area is drained to the south by the rivers Arrow, Alne and Avon, and to the north by the rivers Tame/Blythe and Anker. The river Tame joins with the river Rea to create a wide, shallow valley to the east of Birmingham.



The large-scale rolling topography of the wooded estate landscapes is characterised by prominent hilltop woods. Dispersed red brick and timber farmsteads fit well into these more prosperous agricultural landscapes towards the south of the area.

### Historical and Cultural Influences

Extensive woodland cover probably remained over the area into the Anglo-Saxon period, perhaps as late as the 11th century, with subsequent clearance and enclosure for arable and stock. Many manorial deer parks were established in the 12th and 14th centuries and emparkment continued into the 15th century, the remnants of which accounts for much of the ancient wood-pasture landscape seen today.

Early woodland clearances were farmed as small hedged enclosures or 'closes', which created a characteristic pattern of small, irregular fields. Open field agriculture was only practised to any significant extent in the Blythe valley, the lower Arrow and Alne valleys and the areas around Bearley and Norton Lindsey. Piecemeal enclosure began early in the south, with most fields being already enclosed before the 18th century. In the Blythe Valley enclosure was not completed until the 19th century.

Many of the commons were wooded until relatively recently, often being managed as wood-pasture comprising scattered trees and shrubs over grazed grassland or heathland. Other commons on poorer, more acidic soils were more extensively heathland, many of these having been cleared of woodland at an early date. The large commons did not disappear until the latter stages of enclosure in the early 19th century by which time there

was little of the formerly extensive woodland cover of the Arden left.

Coal exploitation, influenced by the location of canals, began in earnest in the 19th century. Mining villages sprang up in the north-eastern part of the area and soon attracted coal-powered industries. Cokeing and smelting industries developed and, later, power stations which, with associated road networks and railways, produced an area of 'industrial Arden' between Tamworth and Nuneaton. The 19th and 20th century expansion of Coventry has had a strong influence on the surrounding landscape.

Birmingham developed in a fairly compact way from its original medieval centre and small-scale medieval industries. A ring of encircling suburbs began after the arrival of the railways and this pattern of concentric development continued through the 20th century. The result is a rich variety of suburban types from the model village of Bournville to tower blocks.

Arden's association with Shakespeare is well known, and the Elizabethan connection has been emphasised by Sir Walter Scott's novel *Kenilworth*. In a more recent period, at the western edge of the area, Hagley and Leasowes at Halesowen are historic parks which have formed a focus for writers and designers, eg William Shenstone at Leasowes and James Thompson at Hagley. North Arden features

strongly in George Eliot's novels. Tolkien's home at Hall Green is reflected in the fantasy landscape of his books.

### Buildings and Settlement

The open field agriculture in the river valleys and elsewhere was associated with nucleated villages but, elsewhere, the pattern of settlement is scattered and dispersed. The commons attracted settlement by landless labourers which formed the basis for many of the Arden hamlets and the isolated wayside cottages with long, narrow gardens. The dispersed settlement pattern is reflected in a maze of narrow, twisted and often sunken lanes which serve outlying farms and hamlets.



The rolling topography of north-west Arden is dominated by urban development and associated urban edge landscapes.

The rise of wealthy yeoman farmers in the late Middle Ages, saw the construction of many substantial brick and timber farmhouses, often sited on earlier moated settlements. Brick and timber remains the material of most older buildings.

The pit villages associated with the coal mining area are more recent and quite distinct. Such villages contain much early 20th century terraced housing, often situated on hill tops. Some of the villages were newly constructed to house colliery workers. There is often rather dispersed and incoherent 20th century development around these villages and more substantially around Coventry and the smaller towns.

In the Birmingham area, particularly centrally, attractive terracotta colour bricks are present in the 19th century buildings that have survived post-war re-development. A few timber framed buildings such as the Old Gown in the city centre have also survived.

Around Birmingham the concentric settlement pattern is dominated by 20th century residential development in a wide variety of styles, enclosing parks and open land, especially along the river corridor. On the eastern edge, the motorways, airport buildings and the NEC dominate the landscape.

### Land Cover

Away from the urban areas, the main land uses are pasture grassland and rough grazing, particularly on the thinner and more acidic soils, together with some remaining heathland on poorer soils in central and northern areas. Heathland is now much diminished in extent. Much of what remains has been encroached by bracken, gorse and scrub. Arable was formerly largely confined to distinct areas, noticeably the wider parts of the river valleys and the estatelands, but is now increasing considerably in extent. Woodland is quite frequent throughout the area. On the lighter sandy soils towards the north, oak and birch are the most common trees. The heavier clay soils in the central and southern areas originally supported lime-dominated woodland but this has now been largely converted to oak and ash.

Early woodland clearance in much of the Arden gave rise to small, irregular fields with thickly-hedged boundaries. Later enclosure of the deer parks produced larger, semi-regular fields divided by straight hedges, as did 19th century enclosure of the open agriculture of the Blythe valley. Late enclosure of the large commons produced small to medium rectilinear fields surrounded by the irregularly sinuous boundary of the original common, particularly significant examples being at both Sambourne and Shrewley. The latter extends nearly ten miles from Rowington to Balsall Common. In the south rolling landform and gradual enclosure produced medium-sized fields.

### The Changing Countryside

- Rural character has been affected by 'suburbanisation', including inappropriate building materials and layouts for new development, ornamental planting and upgrading of minor roads.
- There has been agricultural intensification, particularly conversion of permanent pasture to arable, but also conversion from hay to silage. Most of the remaining pasture is more intensively managed, floristically poor and often reseeded.
- There has been loss and deterioration of hedges, the former particularly as a result of field amalgamation, resulting in a more fragmented landscape. Gappy hedges have been formed by excessive hedge trimming or complete abandonment of management.
- There is a lack of young trees to replace the present ageing tree population, especially in hedges and small clumps.
- There has been a general lack of woodland management in many places, leading to deterioration, coupled with conversion from oak to faster-growing, often non-native, species.

- There has been expansion at the edges of the smaller towns and Coventry, as well as around villages and hamlets.
- Recently completed new roads such as the M42 have considerable impact on the landscape and other highway schemes are under consideration.
- Change in agriculture, as well as past management practices, have resulted in straightened river courses and a loss of wetland habitats.

### Shaping the Future

- The conservation management of woodlands, particularly ancient and semi-natural woodlands, and wood-pasture is important in this area of good tree cover.
- The dispersed settlement pattern is a key characteristic of much of the area. Development guidelines and village strategies, including specific design guidelines, can assist in safeguarding this pattern.
- The retention of hedges and hedgerow trees should be addressed, especially in the north-eastern part of the area.
- Planting schemes using native tree species are appropriate for screening urban edges and new residential developments.
- There is scope for the restoration of heathland, especially on roadside verges, and for the active management (notably bracken and scrub clearance) of existing heathlands.
- The restoration of mineral extraction sites is an opportunity to absorb these areas back to the character of the surrounding landscape and to create habitats of wildlife interest.
- There is scope for the restoration and appropriate management of riverside wetland and the conservation of the natural river course and the distinctive floodplain hedge and tree pattern.

### Selected References

Hains, B A and Horton, A (1969), *British Regional Geology: Central England*, Third Edition, (HMSO for Institute of Geological Science; London).

Millward, R & Robinson A (1971), *The West Midlands*, Macmillan, London.

Warwickshire County Council (1993), *Warwickshire Landscape Guidelines: Arden*.

### Glossary

AOD: Above Ordnance Datum



ROB COUSINS/COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY

Based around the former Warwickshire coalfield, the north eastern industrial landscape can be quite rural in character, with pockets of farmland often surrounded by urban development.