

Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB  
Historic Landscape Characterisation Project

# SECTION 2: BACKGROUND TO HISTORIC LANDSCAPE CHARACTERISATION



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## 2.1 HLC Projects in England

The national programme of Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC) was initiated by English Heritage in the early 1990s, to improve understanding of the historic dimension of landscape and thus better manage change in the archaeological and historic environment resource.

HLC works at a landscape scale. It recognises that the notion of present day landscape is a human construction. The fabric of the land that individuals and groups use to create their own notion of landscape is the product of thousands of years of human activity, although what remains to be seen today may be very recent, and has undergone successive periods of change and modification. Landscape, therefore, can only be understood if its dynamic nature is taken into account.

HLC builds on a long and successful tradition of “landscape archaeology” – the study of remains of past periods at a landscape scale. Landscape ecology has also made major contributions. In addition, new national contexts for understanding historic landscape have started to appear, for example the English Heritage settlement atlas (Roberts and Wrathmell 2000).

The creation of Landscape Character Assessments (LCAs) has also been well established. These provide a valuable dataset upon which HLCs can draw. However, it was recognised early on that bolting on an historical dimension to a LCA was unsatisfactory. ‘Views from the Past’ (Countryside Commission 1996) attempted to address this problem, but it is only possible to integrate existing information. It was clear that integration could only be achieved if a new type of characterisation, focusing on providing a historical overview of landscape development, was provided.

Occurring at the same time as these developments, a government White Paper 1991 *This Common Inheritance*, led to an English Heritage project to consider the desirability to curate landscapes by drawing up a register of important ones (akin to Scheduled Monuments, Listed Buildings or the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens). This was subsequently published in *Yesterday’s World and Tomorrow’s Landscape* (Fairclough 1999) and the idea of a register was quickly discarded in favour of an inclusive approach. All landscape within the British Isles can be said to be historic – there are hardly any areas, even apparently ‘natural’ ones, which man has not utilised or affected. The term “historic landscape” was therefore taken to encompass not just archaeological monuments and historic sites and buildings, but also roads and open spaces, fields, hedgerows, woodland and other habitats. *Yesterday’s World and Tomorrow’s Landscape* recommended a comprehensive programme of Historic Landscape Characterisation using, but modifying, existing techniques from Landscape Character Assessment techniques.

HLC is now a key English Heritage programme, with its principles being extended to other characterisation projects and to other geographical areas, including the rest of Europe. HLC ideas have been embedded into the planning process through PPG 15 and PPS 7, and most recently in *A Force for our Future* (DCMS 2001). HLC is also in line with the definition of landscape adopted by the European Landscape Convention (2000).

Over the past decade, HLC has evolved; there have been several ‘waves’ of the programme, each project developing and adapting the method to its own area. A method review undertaken five years ago gives a useful summary of this history (Aldred and Fairclough, 2003). The method was first developed in Cornwall in

1993-94 (Herring 1998). In the last couple of years, progress has been rapid, particularly in the development of GIS tables. The most recent approaches (4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> phases) have adopted a multi mode approach. This uses both descriptive and prescriptive criteria but their subjectivity is controlled and made transparent. Interpretations and observations are attached to GIS map polygons instead of being used to allocate land to pre-defined types. Classifications and characterisations can be created by manipulating the computer data in a variety of ways. The process of characterisation should be transparent, with clearly articulated records of data sources and methods used. The recent HLCs in the southwest are summarized in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: HLC Projects in Southeast and Southwest regions**

County	SE/ SW	Date of work	Reference/Progress	Methodological context
Oxfordshire	SE	1993	Chadwick in Fairclough et al 1999	Small Pilot study
Cornwall	SW	1994- 95	Herring 1998	First phase
Avon	SW	1995- 96	Sydes 1999	First phase
Hampshire	SE	1997- 98	Lambrick and Bramhill 1999	Second phase
Kent	SE	1998- 2000	Bramhill et al 2001	Second phase
Cotswolds (& Gloucestershire)	SW	1998- 2001	Hoyle 1999 and Wills 1999	Second phase
SW Wiltshire	SW	1998- 2001	Donachie & Hutcheson 2000	Experimental
Somerset & Exmoor	SW	1999- 2000	Aldred 2001	Third phase
Surrey	SE	2000- 2001	Bannister 2001	Third phase
Devon	SW	2001-		Fourth phase
Buckinghamshire	SE	2002-	Completed	Fifth phase
Dorset	SW	2002-	Ongoing	Fifth phase
Isle of Wight	SE	2002-	Completed	Fifth phase
North Wessex Downs AONB and West Berkshire	SW	2002- 2008	Completed – final report forthcoming	Fifth phase
Chilterns AONB	SE	2004- 2007	Completed	Fifth phase
SW Region HLC Draft	SW	2000- 01	Pilot undertaken by Cornwall Archaeology Unit.	Experimental, linked to EH Region funded Strategy for the Historic Environment for the region.

Despite the growing sophistication of GIS, HLC is a relatively generalised characterisation designed to serve as a resource management tool. It is not intended to be free-standing, or a replacement for other established datasets (such as SMRs/HERs or other landscape assessments) but fills a gap in the available range of conservation mechanisms. The overall characterisation of the country provides an

inclusive, comprehensive framework for conservation and management – there should be no ‘white areas’ on a map where the historical dimension is omitted. This broad approach is repeatable and updateable and enables more detailed assessment to be carried out when required.

Landscape can mean a multitude of different things to different people, however; a useful definition for the purposes of HLC is: “*an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors*” (European Landscape Convention, Council of Europe 2000).

In summary, HLC is an archaeological desk based method used to define and map the historic and archaeological dimension of the present day landscape.

## 2.2 Other relevant HLC Projects in the Region

Three Historic Landscape Characterisations have been undertaken whose areas overlap with the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB: -

1. The Hampshire Historic Landscape Characterisation (Lambrick and Bramhill 1999)
2. The Somerset Historic Landscape Characterisation (Aldred 2001)
3. The Dorset Historic Landscape Characterisation (Markham pers.comm)

These projects are discussed more fully in Section 4 Methodology.

The Dorset HLC is not yet complete.

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Historic Landscape Characterisation Project

# SECTION 3: INTRODUCING THE LANDSCAPE OF THE AONB



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### 3.1 Introduction

**The Historic Landscape Characterisation Project focussed on the historic aspects of the landscape of the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB.**

**This section aims to give an overview of other key aspects of the landscape, including geology, topography, hydrology, and ecology. This will place the HLC in its wider landscape context.**

The European Landscape Convention defines landscape as “an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors.” Landscape, therefore, is much more than simply just topography and ground cover; it includes the interactions of generations of people who have lived, worked, or passed through, it includes the cultural as well as physical attributes, and it includes the living wildlife, the aesthetic, and the productive. Landscapes are more than three dimensional, they change daily and seasonally, they respond to the weather, some have a greater proportion of hard and constructed elements whilst in others the soft and semi-natural predominate. Landscapes are multi-faceted and are perceived and valued in different ways by individuals and communities.

The landscape of the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is the result of the various influences that have, over vastly different time-scales, acted upon it. The character of the landscape has evolved in response to the basic underlying geological characteristics of the land upon which natural processes and human activities have operated, in turn influencing the patterns of land use as well as ecological and cultural character.

It is an area comprising 981 square kilometres (379 square miles) forming part of the extensive belt of chalkland that stretches across southern England. Above all else, the AONB is dominated by chalk, a rock which has formed the distinctive convex landforms of the open downland and which has had a profound influence on the history of human activity, particularly influencing patterns of agriculture and settlement.

The strong and distinctive character of this AONB arises from the diversity and contrast represented by its eight landscape types, its tranquillity and remoteness coupled to its great ecological riches, and its unrivalled wealth of prehistoric sites and 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century parklands and estates.

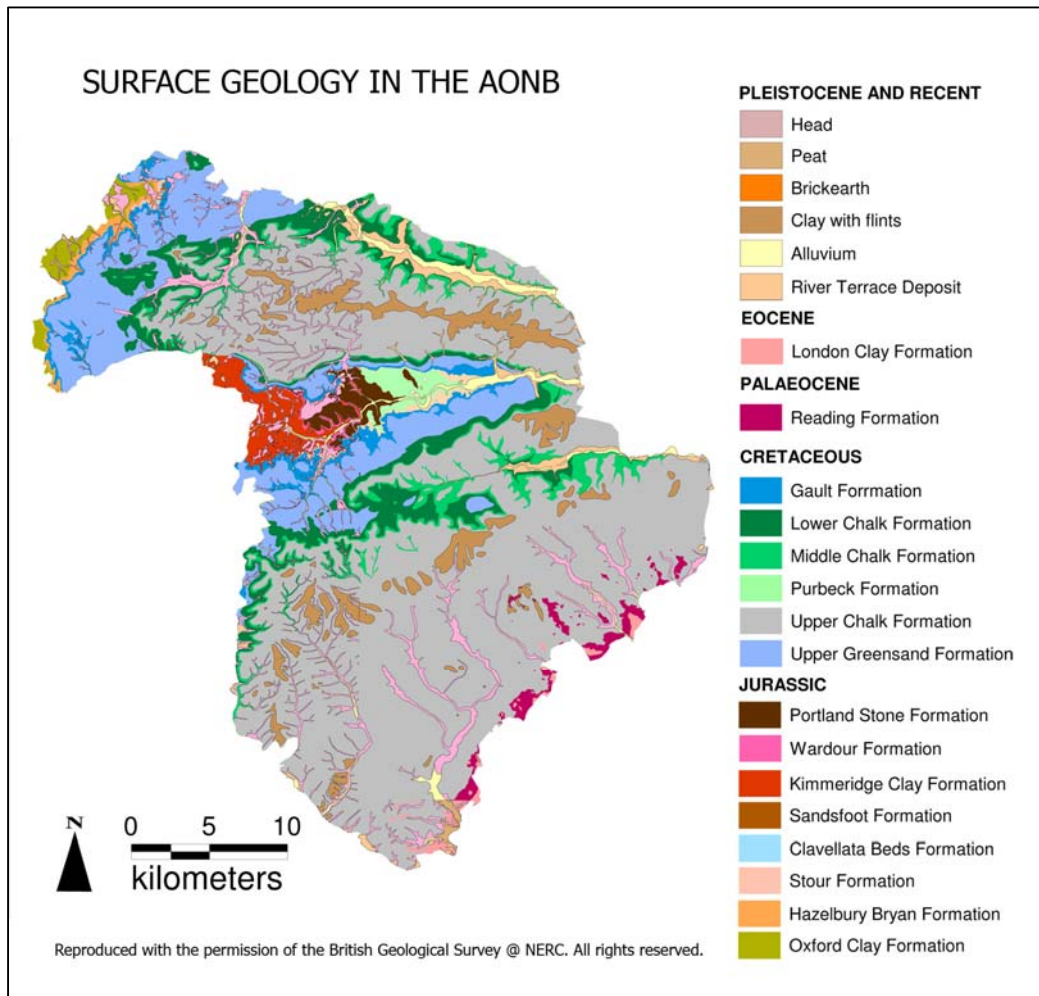
The daily activities of those who live and work in the area, as the generations before them, continue to fashion this dynamic, living, working landscape, honing and developing its special sense of place, admired and valued by locals and visitors alike.

This AONB is a deeply rural area with scattered villages and narrow roads. There are no large settlements in the AONB but nearby country market towns such as Salisbury, Blandford Forum, Wimborne Minister, Shaftesbury and Warminster are growth areas. Although there are a few sites attracting a large number of visitors, such as Longleat, Stourhead and Centre Parcs, the AONB is not a developed tourist area. The AONB comprises all or part of 104 parishes and has a resident population of approximately 30,000.

### 3.2 Geology

The landscapes of the AONB are profoundly influenced by the underlying Geology. This is comprised of four major geological areas.

**Figure 3: Geology of the AONB**



Firstly the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB is dominated by two massive tracts of Chalk (see Figure 3 above). These are the West Wiltshire Downs Chalk and the Cranborne Chase Chalk. These chalk tracts have formed the distinctive convex landforms of the open downland and have had a profound influence on the history of human activity.

A major feature of the chalk geology of the AONB is the chalk escarpments caused by tectonic and geomorphological processes. Foremost among these are a series of compressions and intervening relaxations which affected the whole of the Hampshire Basin. These had the effect of creating a series of east-west faults (where the Chalk beds were vertically sheared from one another) and folds (where the beds are compressed into 'ripples'). The Chalk was weakened along these lines and rivers and streams were more easily able to remove material to form valleys, often leaving escarpments where the ends of the chalk strata are exposed and gentler slopes which follow the inclined surface of the Chalk

The third major feature is seen in the North of the AONB where, the Chalk gives way to Upper Greensand which forms a broad terrace and a series of dissected hills to the south of the Vale of Wardour and a further series of knolly hills to the north running between Warminster and Mere.

Between these hills, the River Nadder has revealed the fourth major geological area, even older Oolitic Limestone (known locally as Chilmark Stone) and Kimmeridge Clay, both of which were formed during the Upper Jurassic Period, up to 150 million years ago.

For further discussion of the geology of the AONB see Chapter 2 of the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB Integrated Landscape Character Assessment (Land Use Consultants 2003).

### **3.3 Topography**

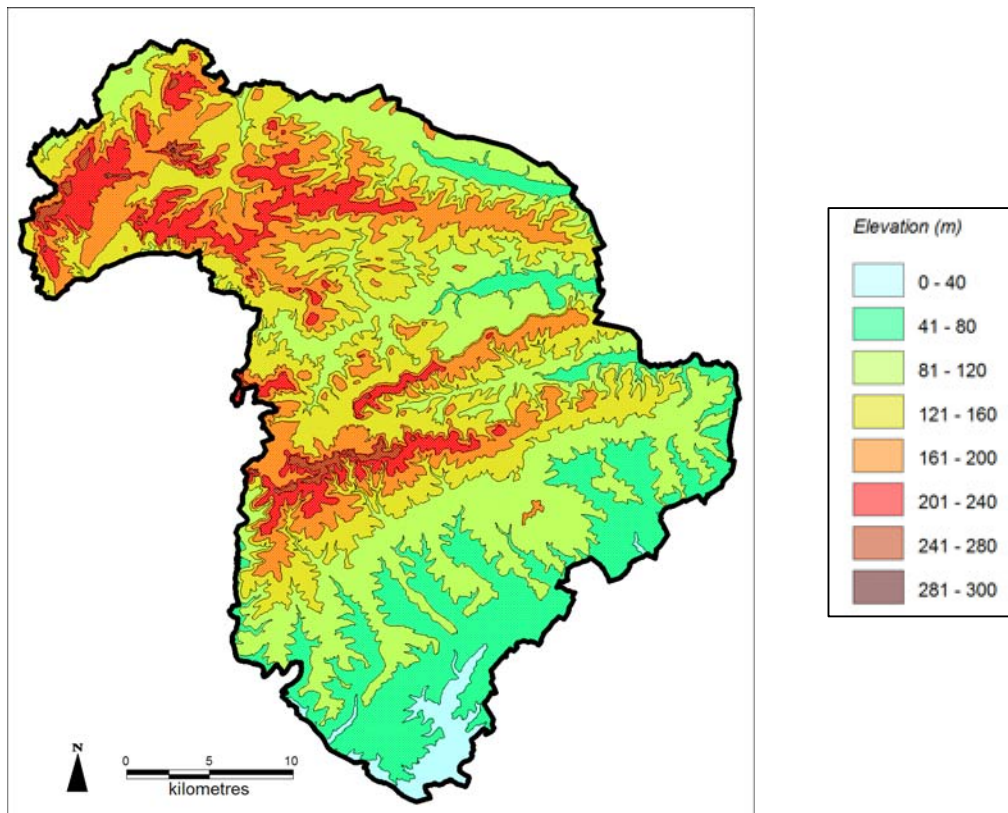
The underlying geology has strongly influenced the varied topography and soils present in the AONB.

The AONB is divided into two broad topographic areas by the fertile wooded Vale of Wardour. To the south is Cranborne Chase with its smooth rounded downs, steeply cut combs and dry valleys typical of a typical chalk landscape. The dip slope gently descends to the south-east where it meets the Dorset Heaths. To the north, the Wiltshire Downs are more elevated, the landform rising to a subtle ridge at Great Ridge/Grovely Wood. Both areas are fringed by impressive scarps, cresting above the adjoining greensand terraces.

Soil types and conditions are intrinsically linked to the nature of the underlying geology, drift deposits and hydrology. Soils have a direct bearing on the nature and intensity of land uses. There are seven soil groups present in the AONB: rendzinas; brown earths; argillic brown earths; paleo-argillic brown earths; brown calcareous earths; stagnogley soils; and groundwater gley soils.

For further discussion of the topography and soils of the AONB see Chapter 2 of the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB Integrated Landscape Character Assessment (Land Use Consultants 2003).

Figure 4: Topography of the AONB



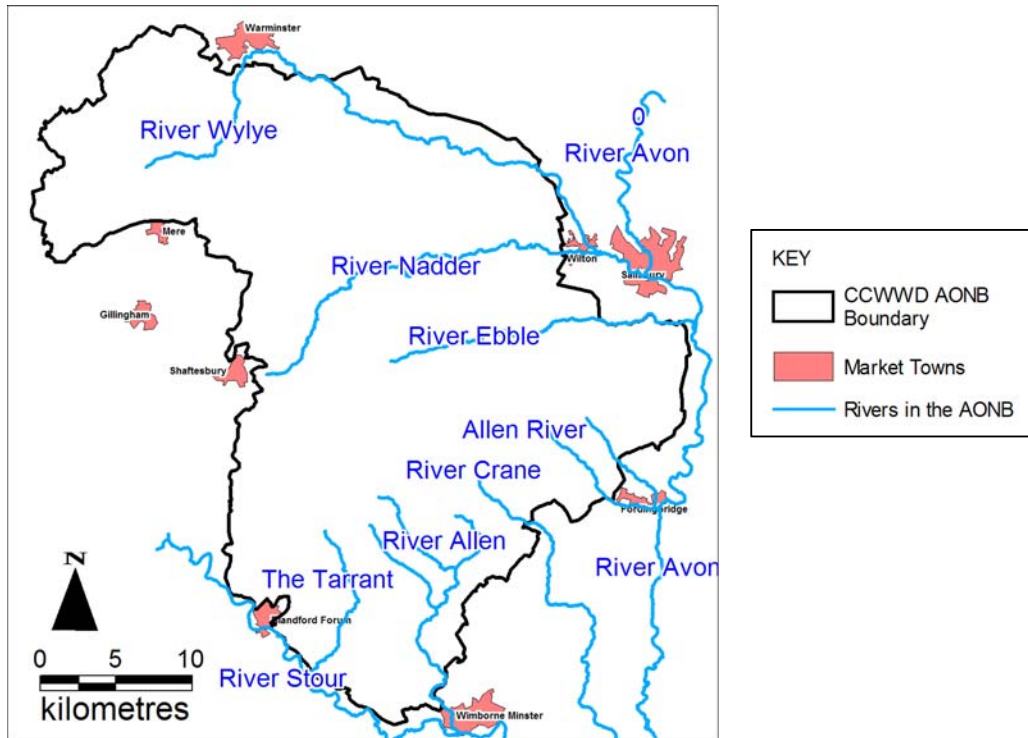
### 3.4 Hydrology of the AONB

The main drainage pattern of the rivers in the AONB can be split into two, differentiating hydrological activity between the north and the south of the AONB (See Figure 5). The key rivers influencing the landscape of the northern half of the AONB are the tributaries of the River Avon which drains north to south and runs through the centre of Salisbury just beyond the boundary of the AONB. These significant tributaries are the Rivers Wylde, Nadder and Ebble - cutting through the chalk following lines of weaknesses to create a sequence of valley landscapes. The Wylde drains north-south along lines of weakness through the Chalk. The Nadder and Ebble both drain east to west with all three rivers connecting with the south flowing Avon.

Within the south of the AONB the Rivers follow a different route. Here, they drain the dip slope of the Chalk – flowing down through the landform in a north south direction. The Rivers Tarrant and Allen drain to join with the River Stour that runs parallel to, and in places touches, the south-western boundary of the AONB. The Tarrant meets the Stour south east of the town of Blandford Forum whilst the Allen and Stour converge on the southern edge of Wimborne Minster. The Allen River and The River Crane, further east, both drain to meet the River Avon.

For further discussion of the Hydrology of the AONB see Chapter 2 of the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB Integrated Landscape Character Assessment (Land Use Consultants 2003).

Figure 5: Hydrology of the AONB



### 3.5 Ecology of the AONB

The wildlife of the AONB is a crucial component of the landscape and the AONB is of great ecological importance. The AONB exhibits exceptionally rich and diverse habitats. The key habitats within the AONB include chalk grassland, chalk rivers and streams, broadleaved and yew woodland, acid and neutral grassland, unimproved neutral wet grassland and wet meadows, and finally arable farmland.

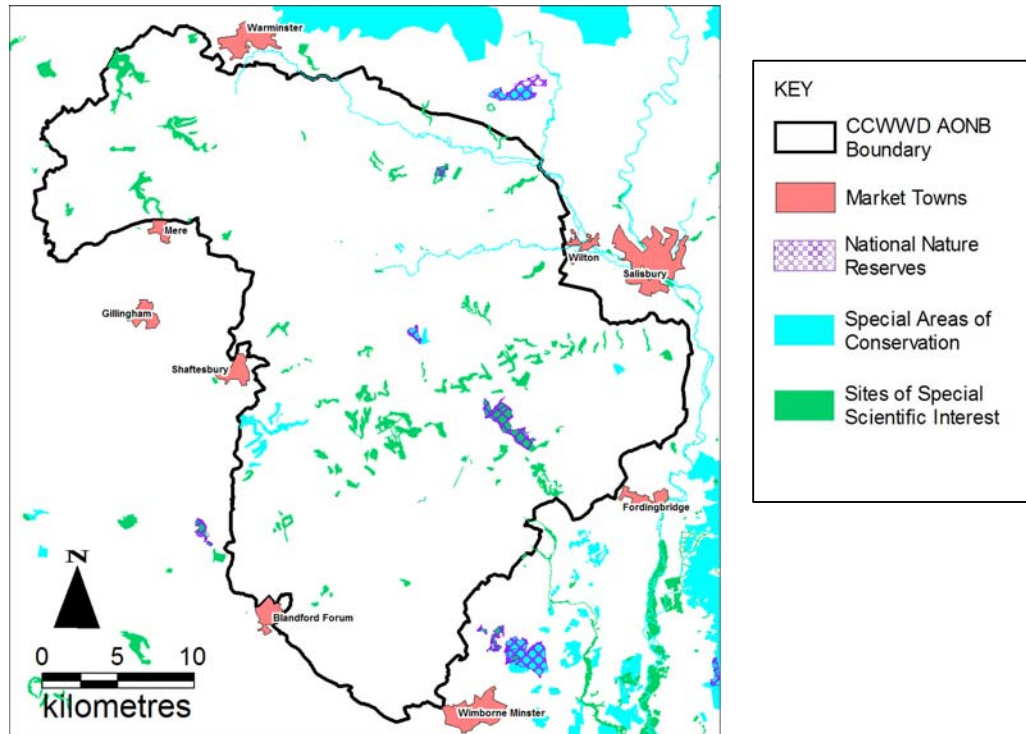
The AONB covers two of English Nature's Natural Areas. These are subdivisions of England identified as being unique on the basis of their physical, wildlife, land use and cultural attributes.

The Wessex Vales Natural Area is found in the northwest corner of the AONB and supports a variety of habitats from wet woodland, acid woodland to both calcareous and neutral meadows. The South Wessex Downs Natural Area covers the vast majority of the remaining area and is strongly characterised by the underlying chalk. It is internationally renowned for its chalk grassland, chalk rivers and the many notable and often rare species associated with these habitats.

The protected sites in the AONB recognise the significance of these habitats. These sites range from ancient downland, herb-rich fen and river meadow to scattered deciduous woodland which includes remnants of the ancient Cranborne Chase hunting forest and the former Royal Forests of Selwood and Gillingham. The AONB supports international nature conservation designations including five candidate Special Areas of Conservation (cSACs), three National Nature Reserves (NNRs) and fifty-seven Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), see Figure 6. Local councils also identify non-statutory sites referred to, depending on the county, as Sites of

Nature Conservation Importance (Dorset), Sites of Interest for Nature Conservation (Hampshire) or County Wildlife Sites (Wiltshire and Somerset). The AONB has 519 of these sites within it, amounting to 9,155 hectares of land important for nature conservation.

**Figure 6: Nature Designations in the AONB.**



### 3.6 Archaeological and Historical Development

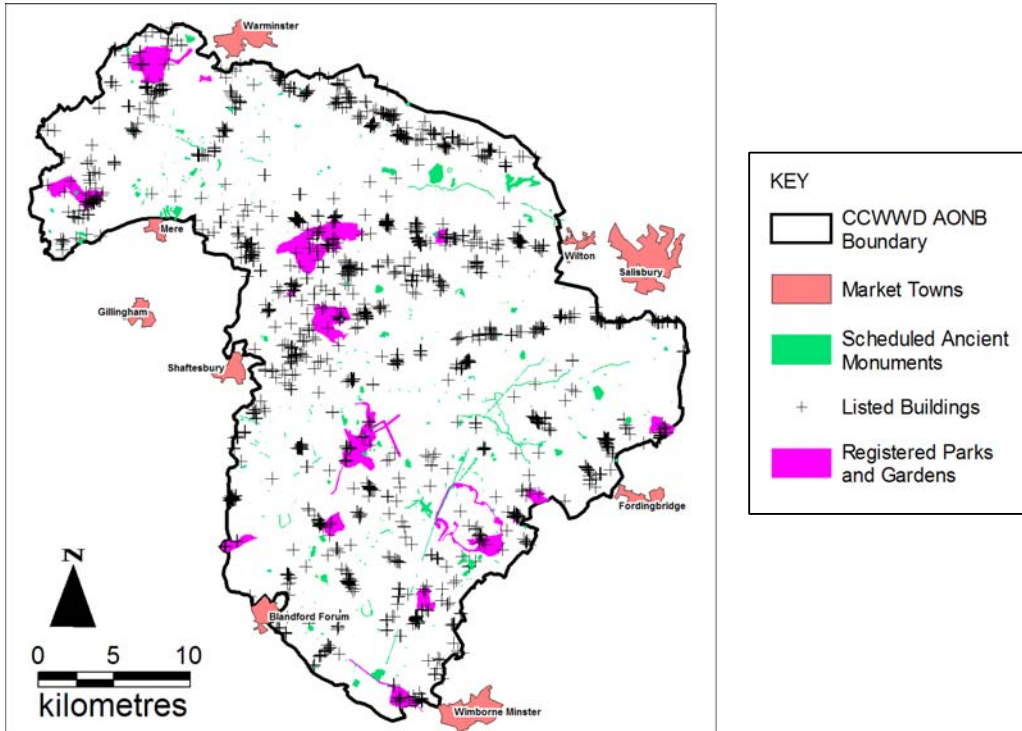
The landscape of the AONB bears the imprint of successive areas of human activity and settlement. Cranborne with its hunting chase and Wardour with its park were set within a medieval world of commons, strip fields and ancient woodlands, the last nibbled into by tiny assarts. Post-medieval planned enclosure and more recent prairie farming have reduced the extent of surviving ancient landscape, but have introduced further variety and interest. The landscape continues to change: agriculture intensifies, infrastructures are upgraded and the make up of rural society and settlement adjusts to regional and national pressures. It is susceptible to a range of forces for change, many of which will impact on the historic environment.

It has a special place in archaeology, being of course, one of the richest and most closely studied parts of prehistoric Wessex, the haunt of Pitt Rivers, Heywood Sumner, Richard Bradley and Martin Green.

This rich archaeology and historical legacy is reflected by the sites which have been nationally designated in the AONB. There are 556 Scheduled Ancient Monuments, 2015 Listed Buildings, 77 of which are Grade I, and 16 Registered Parks and Gardens. See Figure 7. In addition, there are 63 Conservation Areas which have been locally designated by the relevant District Council.

A full overview of the Archaeological and Historical can be found in Chapter 4 of the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB Integrated Landscape Character Assessment (Land Use Consultants 2003)

**Figure 7: Historical and Archaeological Designations in the AONB**



### 3.7 Landscape Character

The Cranborne Chase & West Wiltshire Downs AONB is covered by five national scale Countryside Character Areas as defined by the Countryside Agency in 1993. These can be described as broad areas which each have a distinctive and cohesive character.

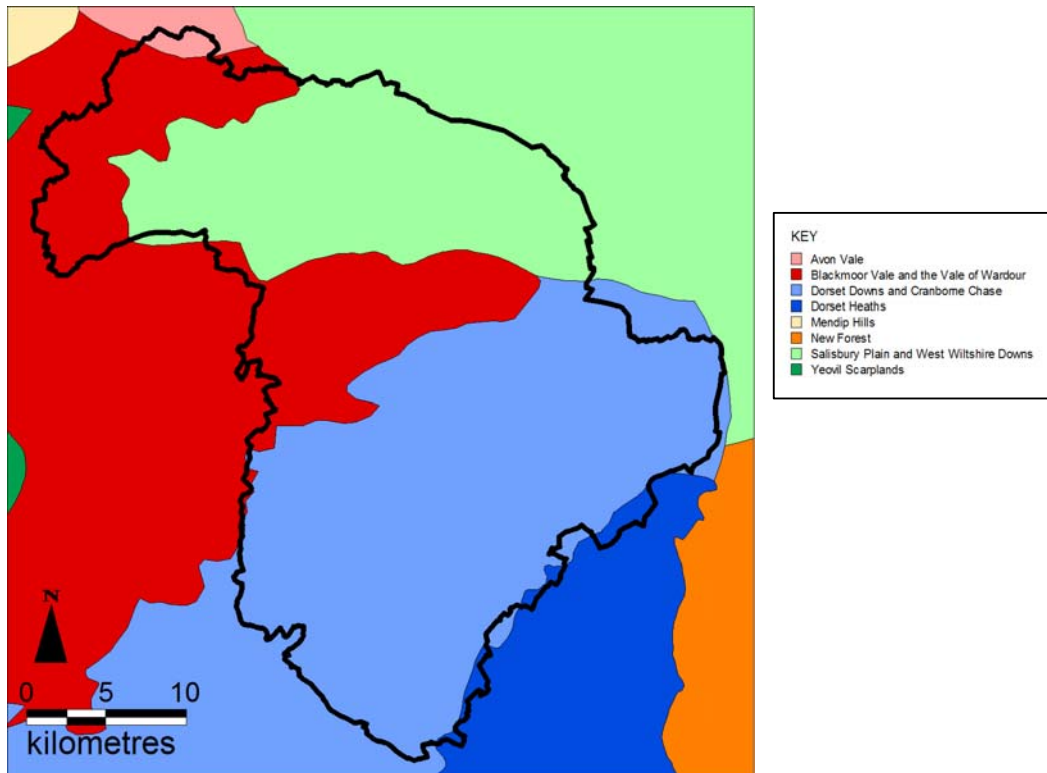
The majority of the AONB is covered by just three areas: area 132, Salisbury and West Wiltshire Downs; area 133, Blackmoor (sic) Vale and the Vale of Wardour; and area 134, Dorset Downs and Cranborne Chase. Area 117, Avon Vale borders the AONB to the north and area 135, Dorset Heaths borders the AONB to the south (see figure 8).

In 2003 an Integrated Landscape Character Assessment was produced for the AONB by Land Use Consultants on behalf of the Countryside Agency (Land Use Consultants 2003). This built on an earlier Landscape Character Assessment undertaken in the nineties (Countryside Commission 1995).

Landscape Character Assessment seeks to present a fully integrated view of the landscape incorporating all the features and attributes that contribute to the special and distinctive character of the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs. The physical, cultural, social and economic influences have combined to create the

unique and distinctive character of the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB. (CCWWD AONB 2006).

**Figure 8: Location of Joint Countryside Character Areas in the AONB**



The area is characterised by a diversity of landscapes and these are represented by eight Landscape Types. These range from the high open remote downland, the ancient forests and woodland of Cranborne Chase and the dramatic steep escarpment slopes, to the more intimate secluded chalk river valleys with their distinctive pattern of settlement. Each Type has a distinct character with similar physical and cultural attributes. The landscape types can be further sub-divided into component Landscape Character Areas. Each character area has a distinct and recognisable local identity (see Figure 9).

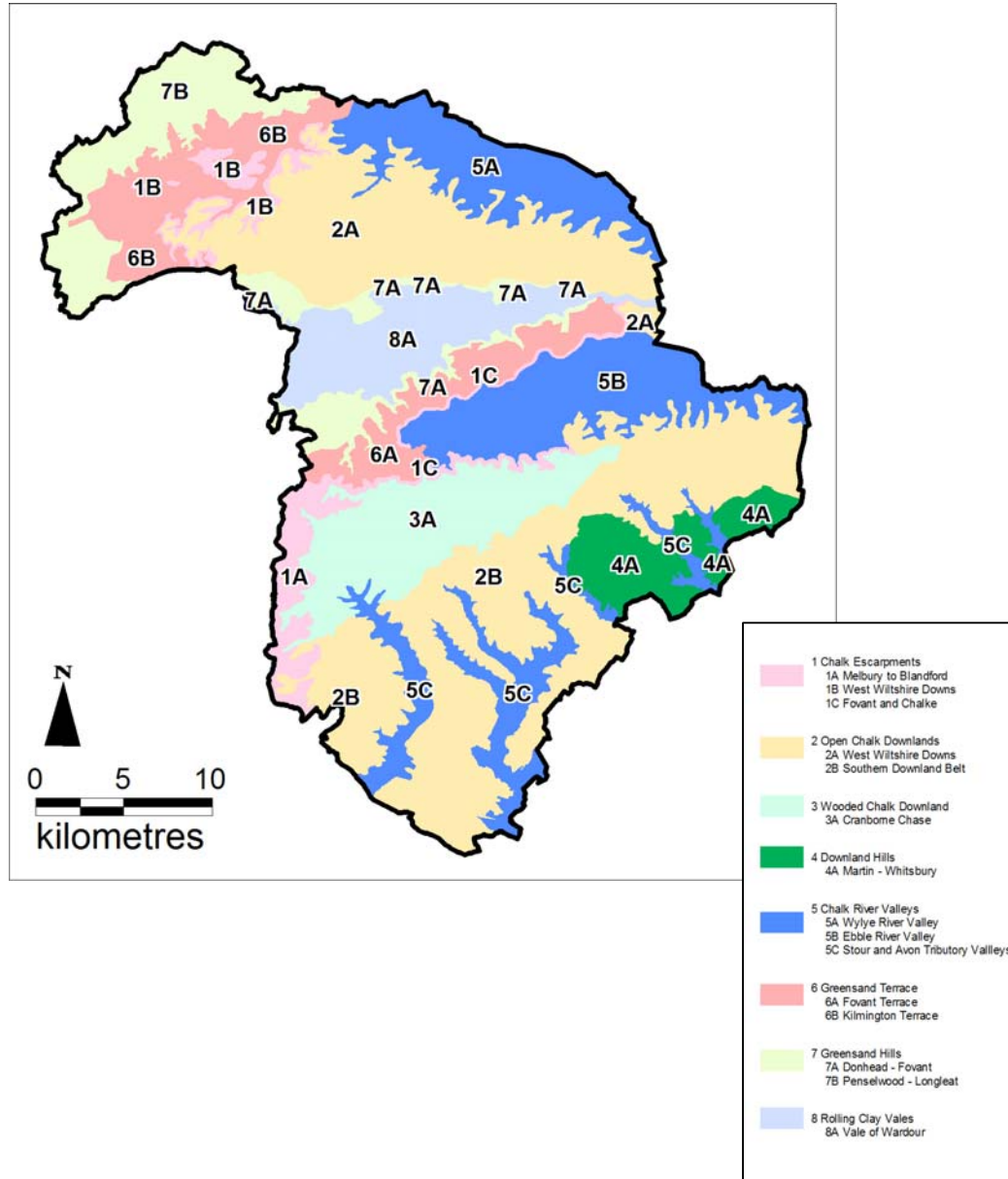
The Landscape Character Assessment shows that the key elements of the AONB (Land Use Consultants 2003) are as follows: -

- Simple and elemental character of the open downland - wide expansive skies, dominant skylines, dramatic escarpments and panoramic views
- Unity of the underlying chalk expressed in the distinctive and sometimes, dramatically sculpted landforms, open vistas, escarpments and combs.
- A peaceful, tranquil, deeply rural area – largely ‘unspoilt’ and maintained as a working agricultural landscape
- Strong sense of remoteness with expanses of dark skies
- Juxtaposition and contrast of the open exposed downland incised by intimate settled valleys and vales



- A landscape etched with the imprint of the past – visible historic features including prehistoric earthworks, hillforts, field systems and water meadows and unique landscapes associated with the former Royal hunting forests

**Figure 9: Landscape Character Types and Areas in the AONB**



- Sparsely populated with absence of any large scale settlement – reinforcing strong AONB communities and sense of place
- Distinctive settlement pattern along the valleys and vales and small medieval villages along the scarp springline. Local vernacular building styles including the chequer pattern of knapped flint and clunch and straw thatch
- Overlain by a woodland mosaic – including the eye catching hill top copses, veteran parkland trees and avenues plus more extensive areas of wooded downland and ancient forest

- Rich ecological character – expressed in diversity of habitats including the distinctive herb rich chalk downland, clear fast flowing chalk streams and rivers, chalk heath, ancient woodlands including calcareous woodland and yew woodland and water meadows
- Legacy of halls and houses with their characteristic estate and parkland landscapes forming an important visual element
- Strong sense of place and local distinctiveness represented by small scale vernacular features such as the sunken lanes and distinctive black and white signposts.

### 3.8 Other relevant Landscape Studies

New Forest District Council undertook a district based LCA in 2000 which had a layer of Historic Landscape Characterisation analysis embedded within it (New Forest District Council 2000). This was possible as the Hampshire Historic Landscape Characterisation had already been completed.

Landscape Character Assessments have also been undertaken by other district councils and at county level but unlike the New Forest LCA have not referred to existing HLC so for the purposes of this study are superseded by the LCA undertaken specifically for the AONB.

### 3.9 References

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