



Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



# Historic Environment Action Plans

Theme 12: Water in the Landscape



## Contents

Introducing the Theme Statements.....	1
Introduction to Theme 12: Water in the Landscape .....	1
Summary of Key Characteristics.....	2
Linkages to other Historic Landscape Character Statements.....	2
History and Context .....	3
Key Secondary Sources .....	3
Landscape Scale Characteristics and Components .....	4
Historic Environment Actions .....	11

## Introducing the Theme Statements

Fourteen distinct Historic Landscape Themes have been identified in the AONB. These were chosen by the HEAP Steering Group as representing the topics which best encapsulate the historic character of the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB.

The theme descriptions aim to provide an overview of each theme which encapsulates the main features of the Historic Environment present and include both the archaeological and historical, the very old and the more recent.



The process through which the Historic Landscape Character themes were identified, and mapped, and the sources of information used to create these descriptions is documented in the methodological statement 'Creating and Describing Historic Character Themes'.

## Introduction to Theme 12: Water in the Landscape

*“the sturts lavished their wealth on the improvements that the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century favoured – the construction of large ornamental lakes”*

*Desmond Hawkins 1980*

The aims are to provide an overview of the impact that the exploitation of water as a resource and the creation of water bodies has had on the AONB and to focus on the evidence of physical surviving remains of these activities in today's landscape.

The former use of water meadows and mills, and the creation of ponds and lakes have all had an impact on the landscape seen today.



Chalk River in the AONB



This document forms part of a suite of documents which together comprise the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB Historic Environment Action Plans.

The HEAPs provide a summary of the key characteristics of the historic environment of the AONB at a landscape scale, they then set out the significance, condition and forces for change affecting the historic fabric and character of this special landscape and identify proactive actions to conserve and enhance these special characteristics. These summaries are divided into two groups:

1. Summaries of the historic environment of the AONB by area
2. Summaries of the historic environment of the AONB by theme

These core documents are accompanied by documents which provide background information, supplementary information and detail on the methodologies used to create these documents.

A series of icons help you navigate this suite of documents:



**Background** - Provides an introduction to the AONB Historic Environment Action Plans and provides background information on the history and archaeology of the landscape **(B1 to B10)**



**Area** - Summarises key characteristics of discrete geographical areas within the AONB, they then set out the significance, condition and forces for change affecting the historic fabric and character of each area and identify proactive actions to conserve and enhance its characteristics **(A1 to A12)**



**Theme** - Summarises key characteristics of historic environment themes, each document then sets out the significance, condition and forces for change affecting the historic fabric and character of each theme and identify proactive actions to conserve and enhance its characteristics **(T1 to T14)**



**Supplementary** - A series of documents which explore supplementary issues of relevance to the Historic Environment Action Plans **(S1 to S2)**



**Method** - Introduces the methodology behind the production of the Historic Environment Action Plans **(M1 to M3)**

### Summary of Key Characteristics

- Evidence of relic water meadows stretching along the bottom of all the chalk river valleys in the AONB including bedworks, sluices and bridges; providing evidence of the former crucial role of the sheep-corn system of agriculture in the AONB from AD 1600 to AD 1900.
- Systems of fish ponds and small man-made lakes associated with chalk rivers and river valley bottoms, many with Medieval origins, but some also forming modern heavily designed commercial fish farms.
- Man-made lakes associated with the creation of 'formal' designed landscapes of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century's, including Fonthill and the pleasure lake at Shearwater – these are much more common in the northern half of the AONB.
- Former mill buildings, remnants of water wheels, mill races and mill ponds in chalk river valleys all mark evidence of former exploitation of water power in the valleys.
- Langford Lakes Nature Reserve forming the remnants of gravel extraction. The only man made 20<sup>th</sup> century water body in the AONB.
- There are several operational watercress beds in the AONB marking the remnants of a once much more thriving industry in the chalk river valleys.
- Some evidence for the manipulation of the chalk rivers' especially where they flow through settlements – here the chalk rivers are contained in stone sided channels and the houses are often located on the opposing bank to the historic routeways, each with an individual stone bridge.
- Historic 'river' crossing points, including fords and clapper bridges.
- The sites of former withy beds in which willow was purposefully grown and managed, now neglected.

### Linkages to other Historic Landscape Character Statements

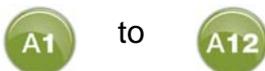
This statement forms one of 14 AONB wide Historic Landscape Character Theme descriptions. These are accompanied by a series of 12 Historic Landscape Character Area descriptions which cover the whole of the AONB. These documents together build up a picture of the key characteristics of the Historic Environment of the AONB at a landscape scale. These statements combined inform the Historic Environment Action Plans created for the AONB landscape.

Other Themes of particular relevance to this theme are:



Theme 6: Industry in the Landscape  
Theme 10: Routeways in the Landscape  
Theme 11: Settlement in the Landscape

All the Historic Landscape Character Areas are of relevance to this theme.



## History and Context

The chalk river systems of the AONB are one of its most characteristic features. These have historically provided natural route ways through the landscape which is attested by the location of settlements which tend to snake down the valleys of the Nadder, Wylde, Ebbel, Tarrant and Allan.

The creation of features using water such as new lakes and ponds, water meadows, and smaller scale features such as bed works for growing willow or watercress, have provided features in the landscape which have both aesthetic and economic value.

These man-made constructions have the origins in the fish ponds of the Medieval period. These features are still enjoyed in the modern day and have great recreational and environmental importance, whether they are found in the setting of formalised 18<sup>th</sup> century landscape parks, as an integral part of settlements, or along the lengths of the many chalk valleys found in the AONB.



*Langford Lake Nature Reserve*

## Key Secondary Sources

The main source of detail on the wider pattern of water features in the AONB is the Historic Landscape Characterisation report available from [www.historiclandscape.co.uk](http://www.historiclandscape.co.uk)

The main archaeological record for the area is the county based Historic Environment Record in Dorset, Hampshire and Somerset and the Sites and Monuments Record in Wiltshire.

Information on the listed buildings in the area is available from English Heritage's Listed Buildings Online <http://lbonline.english-heritage.org.uk> .

Hadrian Cook and Tom Williamson have written an accessible book on Water Meadows entitled. *Water Meadows. History, Ecology and Conservation (2007)* published by Windgatherer Press.

## Landscape Scale Characteristics and Components

### 1. Artificial Water bodies in the AONB

#### *Background*

The creation of artificial lakes and ponds dates back to the Medieval period. The ornamental lakes at Wardour Castle, for example, were created from existing stepped Medieval fish ponds. The majority of the lakes and ponds identified in the dataset have their origins in the creation of landscaped parks of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, although many of these no doubt have earlier origins. Impressive examples of these ornamental lakes include Fonthill Lake and the lake at Stourhead. The latter forms the hub of the man-made landscape at Stourhead, as you progress round the lake you are presented with a series of carefully composed views, of which the lake forms a central part. The formal lakes within Longleat and Stourhead Parks are depicted on Andrews' and Dury's 1773 Map of Wiltshire, while Shear Water and Fonthill Lakes first appear on the Ordnance Survey 1820s surveyors maps.

Nine of the lakes recorded are 20<sup>th</sup> century in origin though many of these have been created for aesthetic reasons, some have more utilitarian origins. Langford Lakes in the Wylde Valley, for example, is the result of gravel extraction.



*Lake at Stourhead*

### Landscape scale impact

Today many of the lakes still form a central feature in landscape parks. Many are also valued recreational assets, Shear Water, for example, is now a major fishing lake. Others, such as Langford Lakes, now form the centre of protected nature reserves.

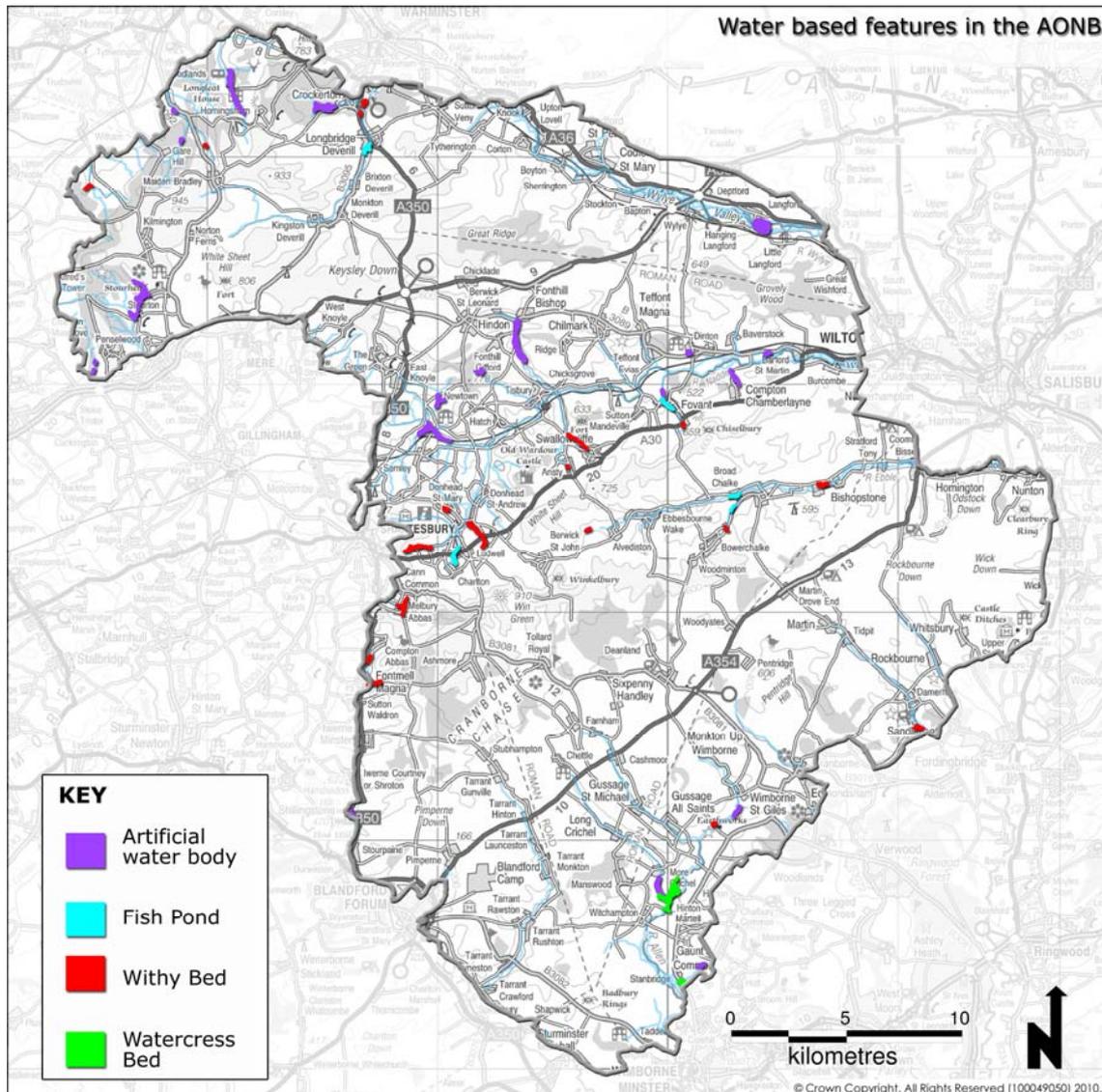


Figure One: Water Based Features in the AONB

## 2. Fishponds and Hatcheries

### Background

The creation of fish ponds in the AONB dates back to the medieval period. This is especially true of those identified in the north west corner of the AONB which appear to be associated with abandoned monastic settlements, for example Witham Friary. The majority of the fish ponds are, however, 20<sup>th</sup> century in date and some of these for example at Brockington Farm near Knowlton in the southern half of the AONB, are commercial farms with formally laid out pond.

*Landscape scale impact*

Fishponds have a restricted distribution. These tend to cluster in the Greensand hills in the northwest AONB and around the Nadder tributaries.

**3. Watercress Beds***Background*

Watercress beds first appear at the beginning the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first British watercress farm was opened in 1808 by William Bradbury at Springhead in Northfleet, near Gravesend in Kent. The heyday of watercress production was the 19<sup>th</sup> century and there is one bed recorded in the AONB that is still in use that can be dated with certainty to this period, at Gurston Meadow in Bowerchalke. Since this period Watercress production has decreased.

*Landscape scale impact*

There are six watercress beds in operation in the AONB today; three others have been converted into fish ponds.



*Watercress Beds, Fovant. Courtesy of the Fovant Historical Interest Group*

**4. Withy Beds***Background*

The earliest evidence for withy beds in the AONB dates to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Willow is planted in withy beds in rows and is cut as rods and wands for weaving and/or basket making every one or two years. The beds are found in low-lying locations as they need

a constant water supply. This explains the location of these beds on valleys floor. This method of growing willow is extremely productive.

#### *Landscape scale impact*

The AONB Historic Landscape Characterisation has identified two potential withy beds; these are found on the River Allen in the southern half of the AONB. They were once much more numerous and several other examples exist as previous types in the dataset. The beds have been identified primarily through place name evidence. Other examples in valleys may not have been recorded as they would not have been distinguished from other natural river side tree and scrub cover.

## **5. Water Meadows**

### *Background*

Water meadows played a crucial role in Britain's farming economy between 1600 and 1900. The early grass that could be produced by water meadows was a crucial element to the farming regimes of the chalklands of Dorset, Hampshire and Wiltshire. The meadows formed a central feature of the local sheep/corn system of agriculture. They allowed for the artificial control of the watering of meadows using a sophisticated system of hatches, weirs, channels and drains. This allowed a lush crop of grass to grow several weeks before natural grazing became available and allowed for greater flocks of sheep to be maintained and thus more farmland to be enriched with manure.



Relic Water Meadow Beds at Britford

*Landscape scale impact*

No water meadows survive in the AONB in working order; they are only present in relic form although their major features do survive. The water meadows comprise a series of complex and sophisticated bedworks, which used a system of weirs, hatches, channels and drains to drown the meadows. These were interspersed by culverts and bridges, which provided access to the meadows for carts when the hay was harvested. Water Meadows can vary greatly in their form, extent and arrangement. The evidence for these is still visible in the landscape. The channels are especially noticeable in low light or when the meadows flood in winter. However, since the beginning of the 20th century 150 hectares of water meadows have been lost. They are found in the valley bottoms of all the river systems in the AONB including the Wylde, Nadder, Ebble, Tarrant and Crane. There are, however, distinct concentrations in the Wylde, Nadder and Tarrant where this type forms large coherent blocks in the valley bottoms.

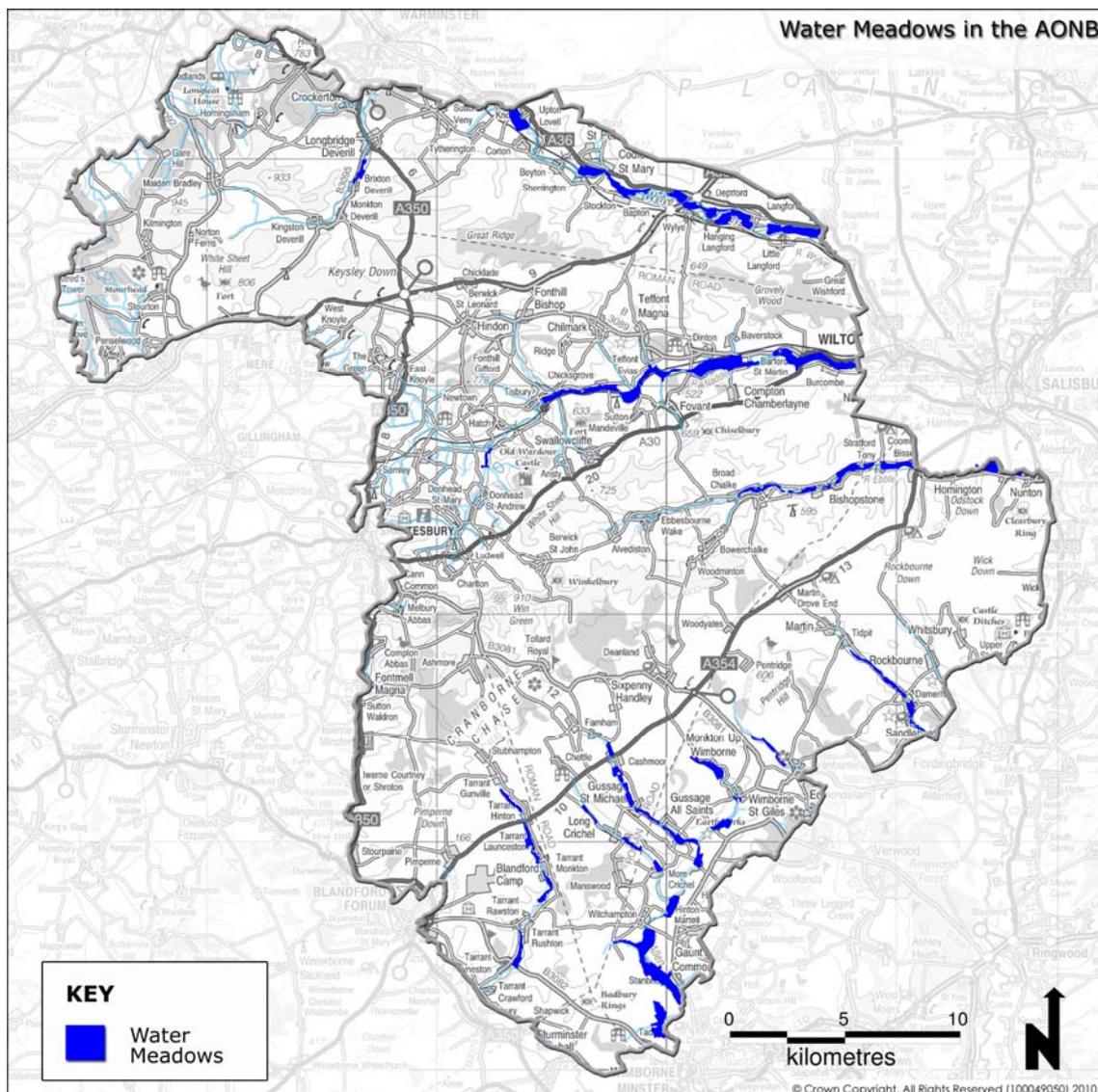


Figure Two: Water Meadows in the AONB

## 6. Water Mills

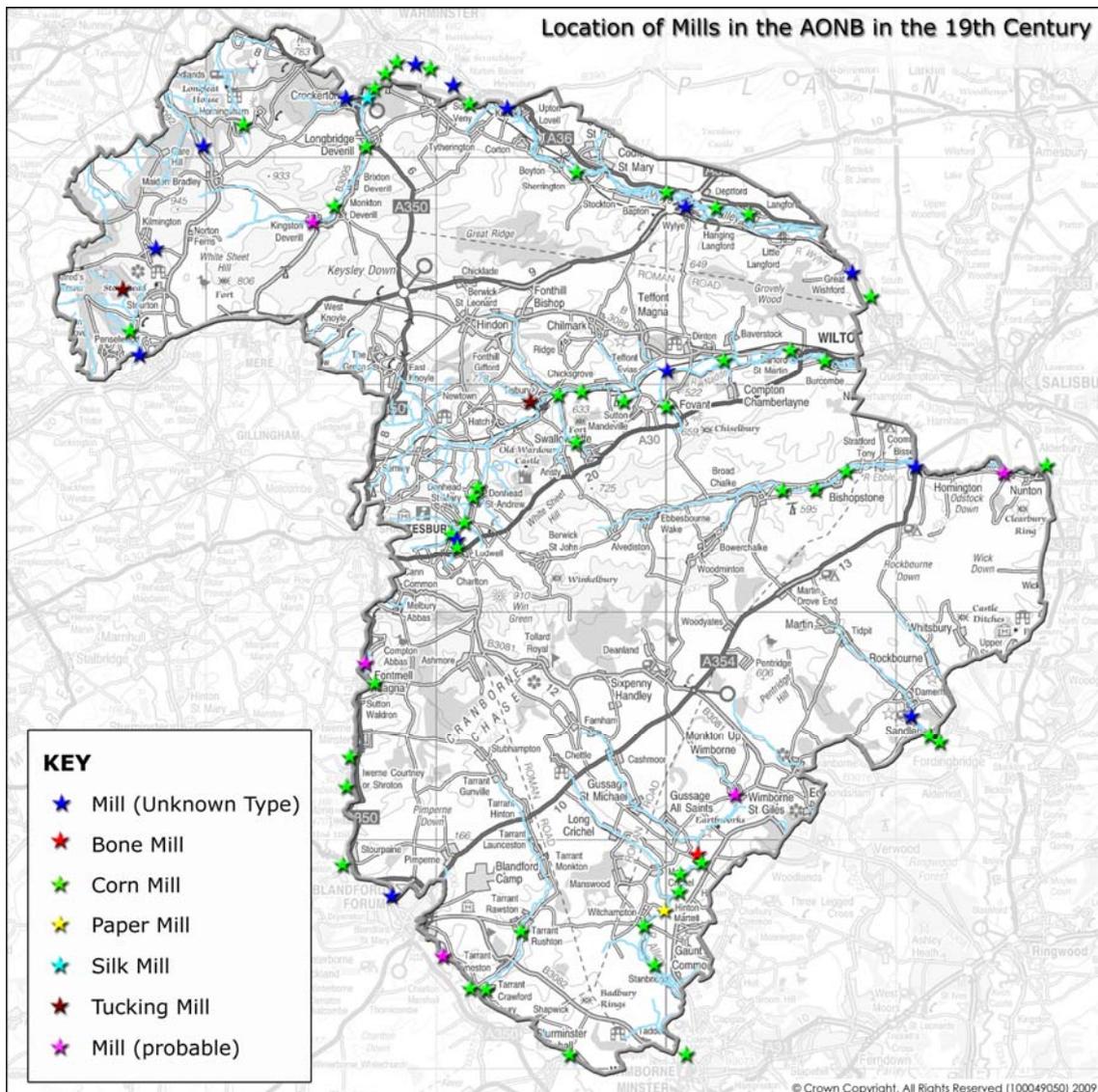


Figure Three: Location of Water Mills in the AONB in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

### Background

Watermills in the AONB date to at least the early Medieval period. The majority of settlements located on rivers in the AONB are associated with documentary evidence for at least one mill in the Domesday Book. These would have been water powered cornmills. These tend to remain on the same site so a mill that looks 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century could be concealing a much longer history. These would have been vertical wheel mills utilising the undershot or overshot method. The latter was introduced in the AONB in the Medieval period. During the Medieval period the invention of mechanical fulling by waterpower was also introduced to the AONB. Fulling was a crucial process in the production of woollen cloth, which involved the cleansing of cloth to eliminate oils, dirt, and other impurities, and making it thicker. During the Post Medieval period other water powered industries were introduced into the AONB including a silk mill on the River

wylie, and a bone mill in the south east of the AONB probably used for the production of agricultural fertilisers.

#### *Landscape scale impact*

Information on watermills in the AONB is extremely scarce. The map, in Figure Five' was created through analysis of place name evidence of historic 19<sup>th</sup> century 6" inch Ordnance Survey maps and modern Ordnance Survey maps. This has pinpointed the location of over 70 water mills in the AONB including corn mills, tucking mills (for fulling cloth), bone mills, silk mills and paper mills. It is likely that many of these locations are associated with surviving mill buildings, mill races, mill ponds and potential water wheels and other mill workings. However more primary research is needed.

## Historic Environment Actions



See Background Paper 9 for a full list of Historic Environment Actions and the stages identified in their implementation.

### **ACTION 4: Identify historic water mills and associated features under threat**

**The Threat and the Opportunity** - Historic mills are an unstudied and under appreciated component of the AONB, although historic 19<sup>th</sup> century Ordnance Survey maps demonstrate that there were numerous examples along the chalk river valleys of the AONB. Lack of awareness of the history, numbers and condition of surviving mills leaves this important historical resource vulnerable, especially at a time when many rural buildings are subject to alteration in advance of reuse. The lack of information about this historic feature means that key features may be lost through development, lack of maintenance, lack of modern use or unsympathetic land management.

**The Potential Mechanism** - This action, as a starting point, could determine the extent of former and surviving mill buildings and associated features such as water wheels and mill races. It would also determine their general condition and suggest further steps which could be taken to ensure their preservation.

### **ACTION 20: Promote understanding of positive management of water meadows systems by identifying good practice, benefits and skills and training required.**

**The Threat and the Opportunity** - The sheep-corn system of agriculture was a dominant part of the rural economy in the AONB landscape between AD 1600 and AD 1900, and is still represented by the extensive pattern of historic water meadow systems which exist throughout its chalk valleys of the AONB. These extensive features have never been surveyed and are no longer in a landscape scale system of management.

**The Potential Mechanism** - This action will help to combat this threat by providing, as a starting point, a survey of the extent and surviving components of the water meadows in the AONB; and identifying good practice examples of their management. If a National Mapping Programme project can be established for the AONB then this could include the careful plotting of the patterns of water meadow systems.



Version 1 December 2010. Written by Emma Rouse, HEAP Officer  
© Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB  
All photographs copyright AONB office; Nick Smith; Tracy Rich;  
Fovant Historical Interest Group & Carolyn White  
All Map content property of the AONB Office  
All base mapping with the permission of the Ordnance Survey  
© Crown Copyright. All Rights Reserved (100049050) 2010.

Background	B1	Introducing the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB Historic Environment Action Plans
	B2	Description of the Archaeology of the AONB by Time Period
	B3	History of Archaeological Discovery
	B4	Land Use
	B5	Local Distinctiveness
	B6	People in the Landscape
	B7	Major Historical Events, Trends and Fashions
	B8	Designated Heritage Assets
	B9	Full List of Historic Environment Actions
	B10	References and Glossary
Area	A1	Longleat to Penselwood Hills and Kilmington Common
	A2	Sutton Veny, Cold Kitchen Hill and Zeals Knoll
	A3	Chalk River Valleys
	A4	Northern Wylde and Ebbel Valley Sides
	A5	West Wiltshire Downs
	A6	Great Ridge and Grovelly Woods
	A7	Fovant Terrace and the Area Between Chalbury and Woodlands
	A8	Chalk Escarpments
	A9	Vale of Wardour
	A10	Wooded Chalk Downland of the Cranborne Chase and Chetterwood
	A11	Downland Hills
	A12	Southern Downland Belt
Theme	T1	Ancient Boundaries and Land Ownership
	T2	Farms and Farming
	T3	Fields in the Landscape
	T4	Historic Parks and Gardens in the Landscape
	T5	Hunting Landscapes
	T6	Industry in the Landscape
	T7	Landscapes of Militarism, Commemoration & Defence
	T8	Landscapes of Prehistory
	T9	Open Land
	T10	Routeways in the Landscape
	T11	Settlement in the Landscape
	T12	<b>Water in the Landscape</b>
	T13	Woodland and Trees in the Landscape
	T14	Historic Features of Local Value
Supplementary	S1	Planning and Historic Landscape Character: A Guide for the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB
	S2	Forces for Change Operating on the Historic Environment of the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB at a Landscape Scale and their Past, Current and Future Impacts
Method	M1	Creating Historic Environment Action Plans for Protected Landscapes
	M2	Creating and Describing Historic Environment Areas
	M3	Creating and Describing Historic Environment Theme



Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



## Historic Environment Action Plans

[www.historiclandscape.co.uk](http://www.historiclandscape.co.uk)

This document forms part of a suite of documents which together comprise the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB Historic Environment Action Plans, or HEAPs for short. The HEAPs provide a summary of the key characteristics of the historic environment of the AONB at a landscape scale, they then set out the significance, condition and forces for change affecting the historic fabric and character of this special landscape and identify proactive actions to conserve and enhance these special characteristics.



ENGLISH HERITAGE

**AONB Office,  
4 Castle Street,  
Cranborne,  
BH21 5PZ  
Tel: 01725 517417  
email: [info@cranbornechase.org.uk](mailto:info@cranbornechase.org.uk)**

**[www.ccwwdaonb.org.uk](http://www.ccwwdaonb.org.uk)**