

Historic Landscape Character Theme 2: Farms and Farming

“where the plow goes within three or four inches of the solid rock of chalk, are made fruitful, and bear very good wheat, as well as rye and barley.”

Daniel Defoe 1725

The aim is to provide an overview of the impact of farms and farming on the AONB landscape and the evidence of past farming surviving in today's landscape.



Bokerley Dyke

The AONB is an extremely rural area. Over 80% of the land is farmland and historically, agriculture and forestry were the major employers in the AONB. Past changes in farming practice have fundamentally changed the structure and appearance of the AONB landscape.

Summary of Key Characteristics

- First large scale cultivation of the AONB occurred in the Early Bronze Age around 2000 BC with the creation of a domesticated landscape by 1500 BC. The evidence for this, later prehistoric and Roman farming consists of extensive tracts of ancient field boundaries bounding nucleated farms and small settlements.
- Remnants of Medieval farming preserved as fossilised strip fields provide evidence of the feudal system of open farming. Surviving common land and place name evidence marks the Medieval system of ancient common rights such as grazing, pannage and 'estover'. There is a medium survival of pre 1750 farmstead buildings including the great monastic Medieval tithe barn at Tisbury.
- Large historic farm complexes on the edge of settlements including historic barns, grain stores and outbuildings. Loose courtyard plans predominate, with regular courtyard plans dating from the 19th century being dominant on the higher downs.
- Survival of historic patterns of farm holdings including valley farms which take a slice of river valley, valley slope and downland, and rounded farm holdings on the Chase plateau.
- 19th century model farms associated with great estates including single large examples as at Longleat and multiple model groups of farm buildings as on the Cranborne Chase. Expansion of barns and farms from the 19th century onwards into downland areas.
- Surviving evidence of the 'sheep corn' system of agriculture in the form of relic water meadows and a small number of late 18th or early 19th century outfarms surviving on the downs
- A major switch from livestock to arable farming in the last 150 years associated with massive and sweeping changes in land use in downland areas.
- Modern picture of extensive arable holdings on former downland areas interspersed with remnant grasslands still used as grazing. This contrasts markedly with the pastoral landscapes of the chalk valley systems and the clay vale.



Historic Landscape Character Theme 6: Industry in the Landscape

“The reason why these churches are built of stone instead of the usual flints become apparent to us when we see the quarries, a mile to the south of the road between Jeffont and ..Chilmark.”

E. Hutton 1917

The aims are to provide an overview of the impact of past and current industry on the AONB and on the evidence of the surviving remains of these activities in today's landscape.

Industry in the AONB has tended to be small scale and local as befits a predominantly rural area, utilising local geology and materials for local consumption.



*Stone Quarry in the Nadder Valley
(courtesy of the Tisbury Local History Society)*

Summary of Key Characteristics

- Evidence of quarrying at Pen Pits to the west of Zeals. The pits cover 700 acres and are accepted as being pre-Norman multi-period quern stone quarries dating back to the Iron Age.
- Redundant multi-period chalk pits and quarries dot the edge of the chalk escarpments.
- Former mills, now residential houses, associated with mill races, ponds and water wheels along all of the chalk river valley systems, provide evidence for the former importance of water power.
- Surviving stone quarries in the Nadder Valley and near Melbury Abbas provide an important local source of Chilmark stone and Greensand Stone respectively for the repair of historic buildings and for the construction of local distinctive new buildings.
- There are relic stone quarries within the Nadder Valley. The disused stone quarry at RAF Chilmark consists of several underground chambers, others consist of overgrown open faces or survive as place names.
- Expansion of small scale commercial endeavours away from villages and farm complexes due to the improvement of transportation networks. These include granaries, modern telecommunications, commercial chicken farms and transportation depots.
- Impact in the 20th century of purpose built trading estates, business units and distribution centres on the edges of village. These are associated with urbanised infrastructure including new traffic systems, street lights and signage. Some re-use historic industrial and military sites.



Historic Landscape Character Theme 9: Open Land

“The vast flocks of sheep, which one everywhere see upon these downs, and the great number of thouse flocks, is a sight truly worth oberuation”

Defoe 1725

The aims are to provide an overview of the impact that the exploitation of grazed and open land has had had on the AONB and to focus on the evidence of physical surviving remains of these activities in today’s landscape.

The former exploitation of areas of open downland, furze, heath and rough grazing all contributed to the landscape seen today.



Surviving grassland on the Cranborne Chase

Summary of Key Characteristics

- Large area of surviving open downland at Martin Down National Nature Reserve, marks an important survival of an historic landscape type which even 60 years ago covered much of the AONB.
- Areas of semi-enclosed formerly open, grass chalk downland are found on the tops, edges and sides of chalk escarpments. In some cases those cover extensive areas such as the National Trust holdings at Wyn Green and Melbury Down.
- Some areas of surviving open land in the AONB are densely covered in furze (gorse), in the past this resource was extensively exploited as fuel in the downland areas where wood was scarce.
- Surviving areas of rough grazing common land around Semley, either side of historic routeways, and wooded over common land on higher ground to south marks historic survival of a once much more extensive historic landscape type.
- Surviving areas of rough grazing on the edge of settlements and fields marking areas of poor quality agricultural land which it is not worth converting to farmed land.
- There are some small areas of marsh in the base of the chalk river valleys often fenced off from surrounding meadows and remain as isolated islands surrounded by a sea of valley fields and relic water meadows.
- Areas of former downland are now large arable fields and retain elements of their former character due to the open vistas they provide, lack of mature hedged boundaries, number of fenced boundaries and number of fencing.
- Areas of former common land are still identifiable in the landscape through place name evidence and distinctive patterns of Rights of Way. Many have been transformed into areas of Parliamentary enclosure.
- Relationship between areas of open downland and rough grazing and archaeological earthworks, including fields systems, strip lynchets, cross dykes and Prehistoric settlements and monuments.



Historic Landscape Character Theme 12: Water in the Landscape

“the sturts lavished their wealth on the improvements that the 18th and 19th 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

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 18th and 19th 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 20th 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.

