

Overarching Topic D – Land Use

Land Use Today

The Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is a deeply rural area. The most recent agricultural data available for the AONB as a whole from 2004¹ shows that 82%, or 79,725 hectares, of the landscape is comprised of farmland. The majority of this is made up of fields (78,082) hectares, or 79% of the AONB. At the most general level this farmland comprises two large belts of arable land in the chalkland belts in the north and south of the AONB, sandwiching an area of clay pasture running as an east west wedge through the centre of the AONB.

This general picture is supplemented by detail on agricultural production in the AONB. In 2004 55% of agricultural land within the AONB was defined as being either under crop or fallow, and 23% of land holdings in the AONB were categorised as farms specialising in cereal production. The proportion of holdings specialising in cereals (71%) is much higher than the regional (67%) and national averages (66%). Arable markets have been increasingly volatile and uncertain, but since 2007 there have been rises in cereal prices and a reduction in the amount of land in set-aside. In 2004 cereals accounted for 72% of the total area devoted to crops. Other important crops include oilseed rape, maize and field beans. Oil seed rape as a crop has been on the increase but this pattern is very reliant on market forces. Arable producers are increasingly combating the problem of volatile markets by seeking planning permission to build large state of the art grain stores and dryers to produce a top quality product.

In 2004 permanent and temporary grassland made up 29% of the AONB. Between 1990 and 2004 there was a large decline in temporary grassland (44%) and smaller reductions in permanent grassland (2%) This was initially offset by a large increase in set-aside land (although this peaked in the mid-1990's following the 1992 CAP reforms and has since declined). In 2004 dairy farms made up 7% of the AONB. Over the last 10 years there has been a significant decline in numbers of all types of livestock (29%) and the conversion of existing dairy farms to beef cattle. There are 4284 hectares of unimproved calcareous grassland in the AONB, comprising 4% of the AONB. The AONB supports 14% of the national total of this landscape type.

The other major land use in the AONB is woodland, accounting for 14657 hectares or 15% of the AONB. Important pockets of ancient woodland still exist in the Longleat-Penselwood Hills, on the West Wiltshire Downs, on the heartland of the Cranborne Chase and in the downland hills.

The spatial distribution of farmland and woodland is as follows:

- The main areas of arable production are on the West Wiltshire Downs and across the southern downland belt. Arable also occurs through the wooded chalk downland and in the downland hills in the south-east of the AONB.
- Arable also dominates on the upper sides of the chalk valleys interspersed with pockets of unimproved grassland in steeper coombes.
- Areas of grassland dominate in the bottoms of chalk valleys, associated with water meadows and other enclosed meadows, and across the Vale of

¹ DEFRA, June Agricultural Census 2004

Wardour. Smaller areas of grassland are farmed across the southern downland belt and on the Fovant Terrace.

- The pattern of agriculture on the greensand terrace near Kilmington is more mixed.
- Areas of unimproved grassland are now mostly restricted to marginal areas on the edges of downland areas and on the side of chalk escarpments.
- Woodland is found across the whole AONB. Larger woodland blocks are found across the wooded chalk downland of Cranborne Chase and the West Wiltshire Downs. There is a continuous belt of woodland along the north-west greensand hill and to the south of Warminster. This is infilled by more dispersed smaller woodland blocks. Woodland is largely absent from the Ebble Valley, the head of the Wylde Valley, in the area to the north of Mere, to the south of A303 and through parts of the southern downland belt especially along the A354.

Other major land uses in the AONB include settlement (in excess of 2,273 hectares, 2.3% of the AONB, and parkland and designed landscapes (2,960 hectares, 3% of the AONB).

The settlements of the AONB are widely distributed in scattered groupings. There are four major voids in the distribution of settlement, on the West Wiltshire Downs, in the area between the Ebble Valley and the A30, south of the Ebble Valley, and to the north of Mere. Clear linear distributions can be seen in some areas especially along the river valleys and along the greensand terrace between Warminster and Mere. The Vale of Wardour is associated with larger nucleated settlement, while through the wooded chase downland settlement is more scattered.

Parkland and designed landscapes are widely distributed across the AONB, with clusters in the Vale of Wardour and linear distributions across the south-eastern edge of the AONB, and the greensand terrace in the northwest corner of the AONB. There are voids in the distribution, notably across the core of the West Wiltshire Downs, and in the Ebble Valley.

Other land uses include small amounts of industry (including stone quarries in the Vale of Wardour), military land (including Blandford Camp and man made water bodies (including Langford Lakes).

More information on modern patterns of land use in the AONB can be found in Appendix 1: The agricultural character of the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB in the AONB Landscape Character Assessment.

The agricultural workforce within the AONB totalled 1,900 in 2004. Employment levels in the farming sector though still significant within the overall context of the AONB have fallen by 9% since 1990. An increase in the number of farmers and managers has been offset by a significant reduction (48%) in the number of full time employees. Farmers are increasingly reducing their workforce with the help of increasing mechanisation. Farmers are increasingly diversifying their businesses in response to uncertain agriculture markets. In addition trends in diversification are changing. Traditionally farm diversification consisted of the conversion of existing farm buildings to holiday accommodation or business, with other activities including farm shops and farm based food processing. However there has been a shift in recent years to other opportunities such as renewable energy (including the growth of new biofuels), an increase in equestrianism, and the use of farms for storage and distribution. Agricultural development is being characterised by more mechanisation and larger developments.

Past patterns of land use in the AONB

The process of the creation of the modern agricultural land in the AONB has its origins with the Medieval open strip fields, some of which remain fossilised in the landscape today, and through the creation of enclosed piecemeal irregular fields. At the same time new irregular piecemeal fields were created from open land and the assarting of ancient forest became increasingly common. The first formally arranged and larger scale attempts at enclosure occurred from the 16th century onwards and became politically formalised with the Parliamentary Enclosure Acts of the 18th and 19th centuries. In the 20th century period the enclosure process accelerated with the creation of large prairie fields and the reorganisation of existing field systems.

Common rights to grazing, fuel, building materials and pannage were finally extinguished during the 20th century. The only registered common land in the AONB is found around the village of Semley, although evidence for these former rights is preserved in place names and the way that modern field patterns have been influenced by previous patterns of open grazing.

Only 150 years ago sheep farming was a crucial part of the local economy linked to the sheep-corn system of agriculture which was a dominant part of the rural economy in this area between AD 1600 and AD 1900. This meant that there were very large flocks of sheep moving between downland and valley locations. Unenclosed chalk downland covered an area in excess of 20,000 hectares in AD 1800 and 10,000 hectares of this survived into the early 20th century. Former reliance on the sheep-corn system of agriculture from AD 1600 to AD 1900 came to an end with the development of more modern methods of fertilising the soil than sheep folding. There has, therefore, been a massive increase in arable farming over the last 200 years in the area, with the ploughing up of former downland areas. These resulted in large scale changes in landscape character as downland was converted to large scale ploughed fields. Pockets of grassland remain as relic examples of this former land use. Dairy farming was much more common in the clay vale – leading to the common distinction between chalk and cheese.

The wooded downland of Cranborne Chase are the remnants of the woods of the Medieval hunting chase, and many of the woods have names which reflect this history. Both the woodland here and through the Downland Hills between Martin and Whitsbury is dominated by old coppices. Coppicing is a traditional method of woodland management in which young tree stems are cut down to near ground level. In subsequent growth years, many new shoots will emerge, and, after a number of years, the cycle begins again and the coppiced tree, or stool, is ready to be harvested again. Coppices were an important economic resource and were used for fuel, including charcoal production, for making hurdles, wattle, and thatching spurs. Similarly the woodland around Penselwood and Grovely Forest are derived from the hunting forest previously found in this area. The fact that the pre 1800 woodland is much more scattered through the Vale of Wardour suggests that this woodland was subject to considerable early assarting and clearance, maybe due to population pressure in this area.

Some woodland creation has occurred since 1800. This can be attributed to natural infilling, the creation of ornamental landscapes, larger commercial woods, post First World War planting and the creation of game coverts. However in addition over 1,200 hectares has been cleared since 1800, a large proportion of this was through clearance of large areas of coppice in the heartland of the Cranborne Chase. In addition there has been a shift from coppice to high forest across the AONB as a whole.