

Overarching Topic E - Local Distinctiveness

Local distinctiveness defined crudely is 'that sense which allows us to distinguish one place from another'. It encompasses the special and common place features that define an individual's sense of place. In order to achieve the aim of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB, a concept which includes cultural as well as natural heritage, we must first grapple with the elements which make this special landscape locally distinctive.

Sue Clifford and Angela King, from the charity Common Ground, in their essay on the subject of Local Distinctiveness entitled 'Losing your Place'¹ provide a useful starting point for understanding this nebulous concept:

'Local distinctiveness is essentially about places and our relationship with them. It is as much about the commonplace as about the rare, about the everyday as much as the endangered, and about the ordinary as much as the spectacular. In other cultures it might be about people's deep relationship with the land. Here discontinuities have left us with vestiges of appreciation but few ways of expressing the power which places can have over us. But many of us have strong allegiances to places, complex and compound appreciation of them, and we recognise that nature, identity and place have strong bonds. We sometimes forget that ours is a cultural landscape. It is our great creation: underpinned by nature.' (Clifford and King 1993)

At a landscape scale the main method through which we can start to get a handle on the local distinctiveness of an area of interest is through an appreciation of **landscape character**. Character in this sense is defined as 'A distinct, recognisable and consistent pattern of elements in the landscape that makes one landscape different from another, rather than better or worse' (Swanick 2002²). Landscape character as a concept can therefore be viewed as a landscape scale version of local distinctiveness.

Any attempt to identify, classify, map and describe landscape areas of similar character is known as **landscape characterisation**. The landscapes of the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB have been characterised in a number of different ways including an integrated Landscape Character Assessment³ and more recently an Historic Landscape Characterisation⁴. The latter study provided additional detail on the historic character of the present day landscape of the AONB and identified **time depth** in the landscape.

The Historic Environment Action Plan, project of which this document is a part, is primarily engaged with building on the Historic Landscape Characterisation to create a description of the key characteristics of the **historic environment**⁵ of the AONB at a landscape scale. These key characteristics represent the features created by past

¹ Clifford, S and King, A. 1993 Losing your place in, Clifford and King (eds) *Local Distinctiveness: Place Particularity and Identity*. Common Ground.

² Swanick, C. 2002. *Landscape Character Assessment Guidance for England and Scotland*. The Countryside Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage.

³ Land Use Consultants 2003 *Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB Integrated Landscape Character Assessment*. Land Use Consultants: London.

⁴ Rouse, E. 2008 *Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB Historic Landscape Characterisation Project*. CCWWD AONB, Cranborne.

⁵ Historic Environment is defined as 'All aspects of the environment resulting from the interaction between people and places'.

human activity which contribute to the local distinctiveness of both the landscapes of the AONB and of the places within it.

The importance of these features depends of course on the **perceptions** of the person who is looking at or experiencing them.⁶ The importance of perception is also recognised by the European Landscape Conventions definition of landscape as ‘an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors’. This ‘perceptual quality’ means that even when a characterisation has been undertaken the contribution of the historic environment to local distinctiveness can still escape us. This is because as Clifford and King point out local distinctiveness *‘is characterised by elusiveness, it is instantly recognisable yet difficult to describe; it is simple yet may have profound meaning to us. It demands a poetic quest and points up the shortcomings in all those attempts to understand the things around us by compartmentalising them, fragmenting, quantifying, reducing.’* The process of identifying these different ‘perceptions’ is distinct from identifying different kinds of **value**⁷. Discussions of value in relation to the historic environment aspects of places and landscapes focus on identifying **significance** and conserving the most important places or features.

The quest to understand local distinctiveness leads us, therefore, to look beyond, and to build upon, the abstractive ‘characterisations’ presented in this suite of documents and to create a **dialogue** which is reworked and rewritten for each instance where professionals encounter local distinctiveness. Whether this be through the creation of a spatial vision for the future for a district, the determination of a planning application or the creation of environmental benefits on a farm through the payment of European agri-environment monies. Clifford and King provide a series of key words to aid this dialogue which includes:

Local as relates to scale.

Meaning which implies many associations, deep significance and is sensed in the power of place.

Identity which is bound up with affection for everyday activities and the symbolism of features and festivals.

Detail and the way in which our attention and affections are held by small, complications, intricacies and provocations.

Particularity includes the unusual, the special, the strange, the idiosyncratic.

Patina which is about the history continuing through the present and is related to the idea of time depth in the landscape.

Authenticity and the importance of the real and the genuine.

Returning to the distinctive landscapes of the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB one document cannot hope to describe or encapsulate how local distinctiveness is enacted and perceived by people engaging with these landscapes. We can however make a start by identifying some overarching themes which can inform any detailed dialogue that we might wish to have in the future:

⁶ Goodchild, P. 2010. The GARLAND Guidelines: Guidance note on the topic of character and style. The Garden and Landscape Heritage Trust: London.

⁷ See English Heritage’s 2008 *Conservation Principles Policies and Guidelines for the Sustainable Management of the Historic Environment* for a discussion of value and significance with regards to the historic environment.



An area between places which straddles a 6th century Saxon frontier, ancient shire boundaries, and modern administrative areas. These **boundaries** are more than just lines on a map; they manifest themselves physically in the landscape in the form of great banks and ditches topped with ancient coppice stools. They also provide an emotional framework through which people derive their identity.

A **farmed landscape** where arable farms dominate in downland areas. The sweeping vistas of prairie scale fields contrasts with the intimate setting of the pasture in the chalk valleys. The model farm at Longleat represents a glimpse at the great agricultural improvements of the agrarian revolution which transformed this landscape.



The long thin **fields** around Martin preserve a story of a former open Medieval landscape of furlongs enclosed in the Post Medieval period evoking a very different society of lords, church and peasants. A story still represented in the great tithe barn at Tisbury, formerly the property of Wilton Abbey, symbolising the wealth which can be gathered from the land.

The **historic park and garden** at Stourhead represent an 18th century physical representation of a landscape painting, where the wanderer can escape into a pastoral vision of arcadia stopping to admire nymphs and classical temples through a quintessentially 'english' filter. This upper class pleasure ground can be contrasting with the very Victorian vision for public education acted out at the Larmer Tree Gardens.



Former **Medieval hunting areas** with names still recognisable to day - Cranborne Chase, Selwood and Grovely. The former importance of these areas to local identity and custom is encapsulated by Oak Apple Day at Great Wishford where locals still defend their right to gather firewood from the forest.

The Vale of Wardour is notable for Chilmark stone which bathes villages in a soft yellow glow on summer days and which is still quarried in the valley. Local pride in **industry** is obvious, at still being the source of the stone which keeps Salisbury Cathedral gleaming.



The Fovant **military** cap badges evoke the presence of Kitchener's new army in a series of fields near Fovant and an often forgotten story of young men who travelled half way around the world to die of influenza in their own foreign field. The gap in the tree clumps at Kilmington Common tells a story of another total war and of a former airfield nearby.

Great Neolithic long barrows and Bronze Age round barrows provide signposts in the landscape. Sunken profiles in the top of these barrows represent the fascination of antiquarians with the time of the ancient Britons before the coming of the Romans, while this **prehistoric** landscape still holds fascination for a new generation of archaeologists.



Preserved nature reserves and steep sinuous strips of access land on the side of chalk escarpments represent vestiges of open chalk downland where once immense flocks of sheep wandered, and travellers lost their way negotiating this empty and **open land**.

The rains of winter reveal the former bedworks of **water** meadows in the chalk river representing the last evidence of the sheep-corn system of agriculture. Livelihoods are still supported through cress beds and fish farms but the professional drowners are gone.





East-west droveways cut across the landscape joining former market places and providing the regional routes between the South West and London. Their names evoke these journeys – the Harrow Way, the Hard Way, the Ox Drove. The legacy of people, carriages, carts and animals passing back and forth on the **ruteways** has left behind sunken lanes and great earthworks in the sides of the chalk hills.

The gentle chalk streams have encouraged the growth of compact **settlements** nestling in their shallow valley bottoms. Villages here can be linear in form with a single street with bridges over the bourne providing access to settlements. Estate style dominates in some villages with the eaves of houses in the village of Cranborne proudly wearing the estate shade of blue like a badge.



Thomas Hardy took notice of the ancient **woodlands** of the Cranborne Chase in his description in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and the underwood coppice stands. This is one of the last vestiges of this ancient industry in the country.