The Landscape of the Cotswolds

Cotswolds
Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

CELEBRATING
40
YEARS
1966 | 2006

www.cotswoldsaonb.org.uk

The Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) was designated in 1966 to conserve and enhance the Cotswold landscape. But what makes the area so special?

Many people say that it is the lovely golden stonework of the villages and towns – their setting in the rolling landscapes or more intimate valleys. Others think of the open skies of the high wolds, or the dramatic scarp which runs virtually the whole length of the western edge of the area, with its views across the Severn and out to Wales.

Pressed further, people say that they cherish images of ancient beech woods clinging to the scarp, the miles of drystone walls that mark settlement since early times, or the churches and historic parklands.

In this welter of beauty, it is interesting to look in more detail at aspects of the landscape – its flora and fauna, its historic heritage, its cultural legacy.

The underlying limestone geology of the area, which manifests itself in the Cotswold stone buildings and walls, creates an especially strong sense of visual unity. It is quite right that we should feel this since the naturally occurring stone has always been used as the building material, making man-made structures appear to be part of the land itself.

Assessing the Landscape

The beauty of the Cotswolds has long been recognised and the 'landscape character assessment' of the Cotswolds helps us to make appropriate management decisions and influence policy, so the essential landscape character of the area can be maintained for present and future generations to enjoy.

The assessment provides us with a better descriptive picture of the montage that is the Cotswolds, its characteristic elements, the forces that have created the landscape as it is now, and those that continue to affect it.

The Cotswolds is a collection of different types of landscapes, each under specific pressures. It is only through a detailed knowledge of aspects such as landscape character, geology, habitats, field and settlement patterns, that we are properly equipped to conserve the area and enjoy its many special attributes.

The landscape character assessment identifies 19 'landscape character types' across the Cotswolds. These are areas of landscape that are relatively uniform in character, sharing similar characteristics of geology, landform, drainage patterns, vegetation and historical land use and settlement pattern. The landscape character types are summarised towards the end of this booklet.

Within these landscape character types are 68 separate landscape character areas. These smaller areas are unique and geographically discrete.

If you would like a full copy of the landscape character assessment, contact the Cotswolds Conservation Board using the contact details on the back cover.

Or you can access an electronic copy of the full report at **www.cotswoldsaonb.org.uk**

How This Landscape Has Been Formed

The geological foundation

It was around 210 to 140 million years ago that the rocks which dominate the Cotswolds landscape today were being formed. More than a hundred million years later these rocks shifted and, as continents moved, the rocks in the Cotswolds were tilted to shape the geological features that are now visible.

The single, dominating feature of the Cotswolds is its underlying geology of Jurassic limestone. Indeed, the Cotswolds represents one of the best known sections of the outcrop of oolitic limestone that extends across England from Lyme Bay in Dorset to the North Sea coast.

It is this limestone that generates a feeling of unity that so characterises the Cotswolds. The stone has been used over the centuries for buildings and walls, its colour varying from silvery and creamy white, through subtleties of grey, to a golden ochre, depending on the stone's iron oxide content.

The impact of the underlying geology on drainage patterns has determined where people have chosen to settle. Many Cotswold towns and villages have grown up at bridging points on rivers and streams, at spring heads or in the valleys around shallow wells.

How people have shaped the landscape

For more than 6,000 years, human beings have interacted with their environment, each generation leaving its mark. Exciting evidence of long occupation by people can still be found.

Neolithic long barrows – such as Hetty Pegler's Tump near Uley and Belas Knap south of Winchcombe, Bronze Age round barrows and Iron Age hill forts along the scarp were important markers of territory and, raised high above, reflect the symbolic power of the dramatic scenery. Stone circles, such as the Rollright Stones near Chipping Norton, and other stone monuments remind us of earlier inhabitants' belief systems.

Belas Knap

Ancient field systems and terraces, and fine examples of ridge and furrow, attest the working lives of people over long periods of the past.

Roman engineers carved out the magnificent Ermin Way, linking Gloucester to Cirencester and the Fosse Way, from

Bath to Stow-on-the-Wold and Moreton-in-Marsh. These routes allowed fast movement between great towns, vast rural estates, and villas.

In the late Middle Ages the prosperity generated by the wool trade led to the development of magnificent churches, manor houses and market towns, including Painswick, Northleach, Chipping Campden, Marshfield and Chipping Norton.

During the 17th and 18th centuries the cloth industry influenced the area around Dursley, Chalford and Painswick. Old cloth mills that sprang up during that time can still be seen, particularly along the rivers and streams in the Stroud area and in the surrounding valleys.

One of the most distinctive features of the Cotswolds is its stone walls. There are more than 6,000 kms of walls – equivalent in length to the Great Wall of China. Much of what is seen today is from the 18th and 19th centuries, when large areas of open fields and downland were enclosed but there have been drystone walls in the area since Neolithic times.

Farming has always had an impact on the quality of the landscape. Today, some four-fifths of the Cotswolds is agricultural land. This is a living and working landscape. In recent decades there have been changes in farming patterns and in the crops that are grown. However, throughout the Cotswolds, there are large tracts of countryside which retain their traditional character.

Perhaps the most enduring symbol of the wealth that the wool trade generated is the wool churches that are located across the Cotswolds. Northleach church is a particularly fine example of the Perpendicular style.

The distinctive appearance of many villages and towns in the Cotswolds is the result of a style created by craftsmen using local stone.

Northleach Church

Wildlife and plants

The underlying limestone geology, and a long history of changing agricultural land use, have created semi-natural and manmade habitats, supporting an exceptional diversity of plant and animal life.

Pyramidal orchid

The area's grasslands and farmlands are abundant with flowers and shrubs, providing vital reserves for wildlife including important invertebrate and bird populations. The Cotswolds is home to important species of bats, butterflies and orchids. A large number of species, many of them rare, that are found only on limestone or calcareous soils, survive here. Disused sites, such as old quarries and mines, are also significant habitats.

Woodland amounts to nearly 9% of the area and is a striking feature of the landscape. Much of the woodland cover is ancient, semi-natural and predominantly hardwood. The ancient hedgerow networks that remain, continue to provide sanctuary and thoroughfares for wildlife through the landscape.

Cotswold beechwood

Fine examples of ancient beech woods can still be seen along the scarp and in the valleys – this type of woodland once extended over the whole of the Cotswolds.

Around one-third of the Cotswolds AONB is protected within 'Environmentally Sensitive Areas', and there are more than 30 sites of special geological significance.

The area's commons, such as at Minchinhampton and Rodborough, are historic landscape features. These key areas of unimproved grassland have never been cultivated, their soil lying undisturbed for thousands of years.

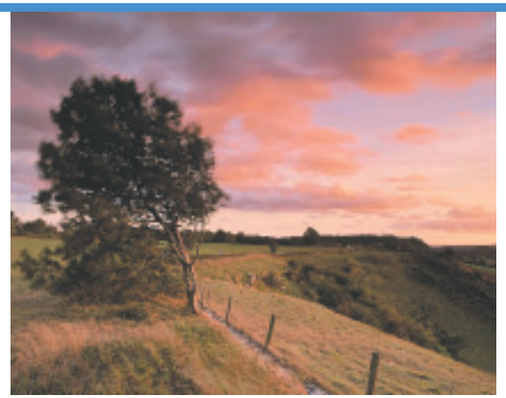
The Character of the Cotswold Landscape

The landscape character assessment identified a large number of landscape character areas and types.

The main features of the Cotswolds landscape are:

- the dramatic scarp which runs along the west of the area
- the 'outliers' – hills that were left behind as the scarp retreated south-eastward through erosion
- the broad, undulating plateau at the top and to the east of the scarp (the 'high wold')
- the gentler rolling hills and vales that slip away eastwards from the plateau (the 'dip-slope')
- the lowland landscape at the far eastern edges of the Cotswolds
- the deep, incised valleys that dissect the area.

In simple terms, the Cotswolds landscape is defined by its prominent, west-facing scarp and elevated, open plateau (known as the high wold). Moving south-eastwards, this plateau changes and becomes the gentler, more intimate, dips of the hills and vales.



The scarp

The scarp is a dramatic landscape feature that defines the outcrop of Jurassic limestone. Running in a virtually unbroken line for 52 miles, from Bath in the South north-eastwards to Mickleton, the scarp defines the western edge of the Cotswolds. It also provides a magnificent backdrop to towns such as Cheltenham and Bath. Rising sharply from the valley of the River Severn and the Vale of Evesham to the north, its highest point is at Cleeve Hill, 330 metres above sea level.

In fact, the scarp is surprisingly narrow, rarely exceeding more than half a mile in width. Its summit is often marked by a narrow belt of trees which, when viewed from the vales below, occupy the skyline and form a dramatic silhouette.

Progressive erosion of the scarp itself over many thousands of years has resulted in its retreat south-eastwards. The retreat has followed lines of weakness, causing breaches in the scarp and carving deep, wide valleys around Stroud and Bath, and to a lesser extent, at Winchcombe.

Stone quarrying has been an important agent in shaping the scarp landscape and some working quarries remain. Areas of exposed rock create striking landscape features. The Cotswold Way follows the summit of this scarp.

At the base of the scarp are the oldest rocks in the Cotswolds. These are easily weathered and, as a result, have been eroded to form hummocky ground.

People must have always been struck by the scarp's powerful aspects. Successive civilisations have made use of its power and position. Its extensive views have been exploited because, from the scarp, you can see and be seen. There are numerous Neolithic long barrows and Bronze Age round barrows along the upper edges of the scarp. During the Iron Age, numerous hill forts were established along the edge as an important strategic defence.

Standish woods, typical scarp woodland.

Much of the woodland along the scarp is ancient and among the most diverse and species-rich of its type. The area of beech woodland and unimproved grassland along the top of the scarp, between Birdlip and Painswick, is a Site of Special Scientific Interest. Because the slopes are steep and the soil thin, there has been little attempt to farm the land, so the grassland remains 'unimproved'.

This unimproved grassland is of national importance because of its diverse flora and invertebrate fauna.

The 'outliers'

Outliers, once part of the scarp, became detached from it as it retreated and they are now left isolated as distinct hills. These noticeable landscape features, as well as being local landmarks, act as important orientation points. They offer dramatic, long distance views and, from the highest outliers, it is possible to see as far as the Welsh mountains. These 'punctuations on the landscape' vary in size but all are dramatic.

There are seven outliers:

- Cam Long Down, Peaked Down and Downham Hills
- Langley Hill
- Oxenton and Dixton Hills
- Dumbleton and Alderton Hills
- Bredon Hill
- Meon and Ebrington Hills
- Brailes Hill and Castle Hill.

Perhaps the most well known outlier is Bredon Hill which can be seen clearly rising above the M5 motorway east of Tewkesbury.

Erosion of the scarp continues and new outliers, such as at Langley Hill, are becoming detached from it. Whereas areas of rough grassland and scrub occupy the upper slopes, woodland often grows on the steeper slopes and on the edges where the outliers join the vale. However, shallow soil means that agriculture has been limited to grazing.

The viewpoints the outliers offer, and their steep slopes, made these hills extremely suitable as natural defences. A number were used as hill forts during the Iron Age. Command of the surrounding countryside also made outliers attractive to medieval landowners who established great houses with landscaped gardens on their lower slopes.

The tops of most of the hills are inaccessible to cars, as roads tend to run round their bases. However, footpaths do criss-cross the hills and walking is often the only way to get to the top to enjoy the stunning views.

The level surface of Cam Long Down stems from its capping of hard [inferior oolite] limestone. On Peaked Down, by contrast, this layer has been eroded away, resulting in the hill's distinctive conical shape.

Unimproved grassland on the outliers supports important plant species such as sheep's sorrel and heath bedstraw.

The largest of the outliers, Bredon Hill, rises from the surrounding vale as a massive, whaleback hill.

The various habitats on the outlying hills are important to a range of faunal species including buzzards, chiffchaffs, fieldfare and brambling. Migratory birds, such as the rare ring ouzel, are also known to stop off here.

The broad, undulating plateau

The principal areas of this broad, expansive plateau extend from the north of Stroud then sweep north-eastwards to Chipping Campden.

This large-scale, windswept landscape gives a great feeling of elevation and openness and offers unrestrained views across the countryside. Indeed, from the highest point on the plateau at Cleeve Common you can see Shropshire, 45 miles away.

Deep valleys incised into the plateau are not visible when looking across the tops, so the impression is of one long stretch of land.

Large-scale, regular fields of arable farming and improved pasture are mainly enclosed by a network of drystone walls. With its thin, stony soil few trees have managed to establish themselves and almost all of the trees that exist have been planted by man.

Upton House

Settlement on the plateau is confined mainly to small villages and hamlets within the more sheltered valleys. The exception is the town of Stow-on-the-Wold which is located on the plateau and has been a favoured meeting place since Roman times.

The landscape is covered with numerous small-scale local quarries or 'delves'. Often no more than shallow, surface excavations, these delves have provided material for stone walls and, perhaps, a few local buildings.

The areas of remnant common land found on the plateau, such as Rodborough, Cleeve Common or Minchinhampton commons, support nationally important remnants of calcareous grassland. Nearly all of the common land is owned by the National Trust and is open to visitors.

Telecommunications masts dominate some sections of the plateau close to the scarp edge. The cluster of towers south of Cleeve Hill is particularly prominent. The tall structures affect the perceived scale of the scarp.

Rollright Stones

The Rollright Stones, a remarkable Bronze Age stone circle, is made up of over seventy stones of Great Oolite. A detached King's Stone marks the location of the rising sun.

The impressive National Trust property, Upton House, was built in 1695 of mellow local stone. The mature woodland associated with this planned estate influences local landscape character and provides a more enclosed feeling within an otherwise open landscape.

The gentler rolling hills and vales

As we move away from the plateau the landscape falls gently south-eastwards. This area forms the transition from plateau to lowland. Although this rolling landscape is still elevated and exposed, it feels distinctly more sheltered and intimate and offers less open views. It is dissected by an increasing number of deep dry valleys and streams, creating a more secluded ambiance.

Intensive arable farming gives the landscape a productive, well maintained character, simple and smooth in texture. The large fields are separated by stone walls, some of them obscured by overgrowing vegetation and hedges.

Although woodland cover is limited, areas of ancient woodland survive in the parkland settings of Wychwood, the remains of an ancient royal hunting forest, and at Cirencester Park.

This area, heavily affected by Roman occupation, is criss-crossed by numerous major Roman roads including long stretches of the Fosse Way and the Ermin Way. Their courses still dominate areas of the landscape and dictate the alignment of later field patterns and ownership boundaries.

Conspicuous features include airfields and landing strips located across the landscape. These range in size from the extensive airfield and barracks near Minchinhampton to the single landing strip to the west of Badminton Park. Many military sites were established during the Second World War, taking advantage of the flat or gently undulating land.

Much of this rolling landscape is given over to intensive arable faming.

There are many airfields and landing strips in this landscape – the largest at Colerne where hangars and former military buildings exert a strong influence.

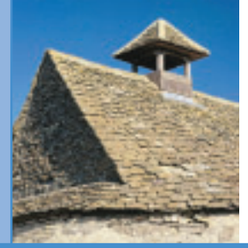
There are also the extensive planned woodlands and avenues of Badminton Park.

The lowland landscapes

These lowland landscapes comprise broad tracts of land on the edge of the Cotswolds next to the flatter Thames basin to the South East. The only large settlement within the area is Tetbury.

Much of the land is farmed as mixed arable and pasture. This well-managed mosaic of medium and large, regular fields is contained not by stone walls but by hedgerows. It has a strongly organised and productive character compared with many of the other Cotswolds land forms.

A notable feature of this area is its historic parks, gardens and 'landscaped' areas. A number are very extensive, notably Badminton Park, Westonbirt Arboretum and Cirencester Park. These have a strong affect on wide tracts of the surrounding landscape.



< Cotswold stone slates

Extensive woodlands and planned features, such as avenues and vistas, impart impressive scale to the landscape. Coniferous plantations are occasional conspicuous elements.

Stone slates have been quarried at locations in this area, largely from thin fissile limestone. Extensive use of these natural stone 'slates' for roofing contribute as much to the character of local buildings and vernacular of the Cotswolds as does the stone used for buildings and walls.

Remnants of Roman occupation are notable with a number of Roman roads – Akeman Street, Fosse Way and Ermin Way – converging on the Roman settlement of Cirencester.

A number of historic parks and registered gardens cluster in this area, such as Badminton, Westonbirt and Cirencester. It is likely that the relatively more sheltered locations, with marginally deeper soils than the higher plateau, were important in the location of these major estates.

Local stone mines in this area are of particular significance and are designated as Special Areas of Conservation because of their bat populations including the greater horseshoe bat, one of the largest and rarest in the UK.

Three Roman roads run through this 'dip-slope' lowland landscape and meet at Cirencester.

The valleys around Bath and Stroud: enclosed limestone valleys

This landscape type is found on the southern fringes of the Cotswolds to the south, east and north of Bath. The valleys form part of a wider system of rivers and streams that feed into the River Avon.

Physically enclosed, these moderately broad, steep-sided river valleys support sparse settlements. However, as there is room for transport routes along some of the valley floors, they are busier and more developed in character.

The steep valley sides and woodland create a sense of seclusion and generally inhibit views along the valley. The upper slopes can be quite open, however, allowing views across the valley.

Farming is both arable and pastoral but there are wide areas of rough pasture and scrub.

Hamlets and villages within the enclosed valleys are located on the valley sides, in particular on the upper slopes where they are generally dispersed and linear. There are also villages extending along the valley bottoms next to springlines.

A network of meandering roads connect these villages along the valley bottom with other minor routes leading up the valley sides to dwellings above. The lanes are typically within deep-set cuttings, resulting in characteristic sunken lanes, with old hedge banks and tall hedgerows adding to the sense of enclosure.

The close proximity of large settlements, such as Bath, Batheaston, Bathampton and Bradford-on-Avon, exert a strong urbanising influence. These towns are very visible from numerous high points in the landscape.

On the steeper slopes of the valley sides and valley tops there are some significant blocks of woodland. A large proportion is registered as ancient woodland, some designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest.

Suitability of the lower valley sides for cultivation, the sheltered location and plentiful supply of water, attracted early man and there is evidence of occupation from the Iron Age through the Roman and Medieval periods. However, the main evidence of human occupation is the impressive remnants of the industrialisation of recent centuries. Located along the valley bottoms are a number of mills, Brunel's mid-19th century Great Western Railway, the Kennet & Avon Canal and Somerset Coal Canal (both canals built around the turn of the 18th century).

Settled valleys around Stroud, including Nailsworth and the Frome Golden Valley

These narrow, steep-sided valleys of the River Frome and its tributaries have a strong sense of being enclosed. Urban settlements follow the valley floor, originally at river crossing points, but now forming a dense ribbon of urban development.

There is much evidence of the area's industrial past. The right conditions existed for the manufacture of woollen cloth with sheep rearing areas in close proximity to the running water which was needed to power the mills. Distinctive industrial buildings and mills, their chimneys dominating the urban skyline, form a heavy reminder of the area's working past.

This is a contrasting landscape with areas that are highly developed and others that remain inaccessible, dominated by farmed or parkland landscapes. Pastoral land covers the valley sides interspersed with scattered areas of scrub, rough pasture and arable land.

Deciduous woodlands clinging to the valley sides combine with the hedgerow network to create a relatively well wooded character.

Protection and the presence of water have drawn human occupation since early times. However, as with the valleys around Bath, the main evidence of human occupation is the remnants of industrialisation. This includes the early communications infrastructure of the railways and canals and the distinctive vernacular architecture of the textile industry – the large mills and chimneys, and rows of terraced housing. At first people exploited the water power of the rivers but, later, coal became an increasingly important source of energy. As a result, factories were concentrated on the main valley floor where major transport routes could be developed.

There are numerous reminders of the area's industrial past.

Bath lies in a valley where the River Avon cuts through the limestone plateau of the southern Cotswolds. The encircling hills have been influential in the development of the city, providing a dramatic backdrop to the elegant regency buildings and crescents.

Communication routes are confined to the bottom of the Golden Valley to the east of Stroud including a canal, river, railway and roads. However, communities have also developed high up the valley sides.

Landscape Character Types

Our landscape character assessment of the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) revealed that it contains 19 distinct types of landscape. These are shown on the map on the back cover and are summarised below:

1 Escarpment outliers
Represent detached hills lying at various distances to the west of the main Cotswolds scarp. Their exposed, elevated positions allow for wide and often dramatic views from their summits and upper slopes.

2 Escarpment
The steep upper and elevated west facing scarp, often lined with broadleaved woodland including beech hangers, is a familiar landscape feature and visible from many locations in the neighbouring vale.

3 Rolling hills and valleys
To the south-west of Stroud the escarpment has been breached by numerous river valleys draining off the high wold. This creates a complex landscape of rolling hills and ridgelines and deeply incised valleys which open out into the neighbouring vale.

4 Enclosed limestone valley
A radial network of enclosed limestone valleys drain into the Bristol Avon in the southern part of the AONB and dissect the high wold dip-slope and low limestone plateau surrounding Bath.

5 Settled valley
A series of generally narrow, steep-sided settled valleys rise in the high wold and high wold dip-slope with the watercourses flowing northwards and westwards into the River Frome. The principal valleys have a strongly settled character with a series of terraced dwellings extending along the valley bottoms and climbing up the valley sides and a strong industrial heritage of textile and woollen mills with their distinctive chimneys.

6 Ironstone hills and valleys
A fragmented section of a broader area of ironstone hills and valleys is located in the extreme north-eastern part of the AONB. This is an area of steeply sided convoluted valleys, rolling rounded ridgelines and intermittent isolated hills.

7 High wold
Extending to the east of the scarp, the high wold comprises a broad, elevated and gently undulating plateau with a south-easterly fall, dissected by a network of dry valleys with distinctive convex profiles. The principal area extends from Stroud north-eastwards to Chipping Campden and west of Bourton-on-the-Hill.

8 High wold valley
A series of rivers rise on the upper sections of the high wold within close proximity of the scarp edge. Their courses display a radial progression from the south-easterly flowing tributaries of the Thames to those that flow south and south-westwards into the Frome, a tributary of the Severn.

9 High wold dip-slope
The gently rolling landform of the high wold dip-slope, dissected by a network of dry valleys, falls south-eastwards from the high wold plateau merging into the dip-slope lowlands on the eastern perimeter of the AONB. This is a transitional landscape sharing characteristics of both of the adjacent landscape types. It extends in a broad arc from the outskirts of Bath in the south to the detached sections of the west Enstone uplands in the extreme east.

10 High wold dip-slope valley
The high wold dip-slope valleys represent the mid sections of streams that form on the high wold and mark the transition between these and the gentler valleys flowing through the dip-slope lowlands towards the Thames.

11 Dip-slope lowland
The dip-slope lowland extends south-eastwards to the perimeter of the AONB forming a broad tract of gently sloping undulating landform and a transition from the high wold dip-slope to the flatter Thames basin beyond the designated area of the AONB.

12 Dip-slope lowland valley
The dip-slope lowland valleys are shallower and generally more open than stretches that flow through the high wold and high wold dip-slope to the north and west. River flows are also slower, with maturing river systems meandering between interlocking spurs of land through alluvial floodplains.

13 Low limestone plateau
The low limestone plateau comprises a series of small fragmented areas to the south and west of Bath, forming part of a wider area that extends to the south and west, beyond the AONB. The gently undulating open plateau supports a mix of arable and pasture with hedgerows forming the most common boundary element.

14 Cornbrash lowlands
The cornbrash lowlands form a transition between the dip-slope lowland to the flatter and more open lowland landscapes of the Thames basin to the south-east. Two fragmented areas of this landscape type occur; they display the typically subdued and gently undulating landform, with occasional very low hillocks.

15 Farmed slopes
The farmed slopes landscape type represents a transitional landscape between the large fields and exposed nature of the high wold and the lush, flat or gently rolling pastures of the pastoral lowland vale.

16 Broad floodplain valley
The lower reaches of the Windrush and Evenlode rivers form broad floodplain valleys. The well-defined valley profile of floodplain, river terraces, and gently sloping convex slopes has a small-scale and settled character.

17 Pastoral lowland vale
The pastoral lowland vale extends southwards from Shipston-on-Stour into the north-eastern fringe of the AONB. The extensive lowland vale, which overlays extensive drift deposits, comprises a soft, largely pastoral landscape. There is an intimate, human scale derived from the sequence of small, hedged fields, undulating landform, interspersed with farm woodlands and field, stream and hedgerow trees.

18 Settled unwooded vale
Immediately below the escarpment, between Dursley to the southern fringe of Bredon Hill, a series of fragmented areas form part of the wider unwooded, settled vale that extends across the Vale of Gloucester. This low-lying area with its soft, gently undulating landform, includes both rural and urban influences.

19 Unwooded vale
Below the scarp fragmented areas of lower lying land extend along the western and northern perimeter of the AONB. These areas form part of a more extensive area of unwooded vale landscape. This is a soft, rolling and settled agrarian landscape with a rural and domestic character.

Much more detail on each of the 19 landscape character types is to be found in the detailed report of the landscape character assessment. This report also contains information about the 68 specific character areas which were identified in the Cotswolds. A copy of the full landscape character assessment report, is available at www.cotswoldsaonb.org.uk, or see contact details on back cover for the Cotswolds Conservation Board.

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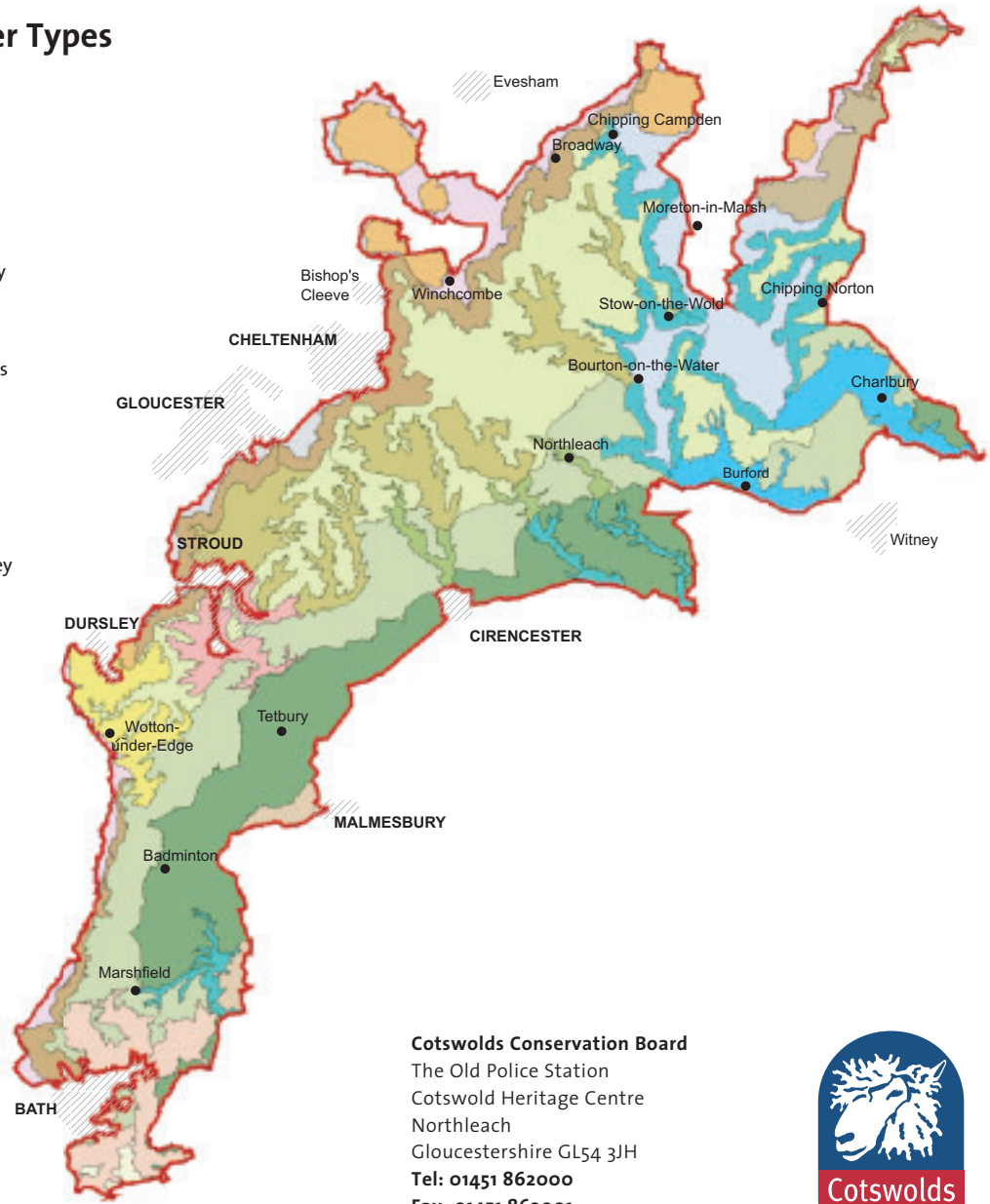

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