



The purpose of this report is to assist a wide range of persons broaden their understanding of what it is that makes the Cotswolds AONB different from other parts of the country, with particular reference to the built environment. It is also seen as providing a link between the highly technical content of a Landscape Character Assessment and the more accessible guidance that exists to supplement local planning policy, particularly the growing number of community-based Village Design Statements.

Research has revealed that:

1. Distinctiveness is essentially about the nature of the landscape, as defined and understood in its broadest sense. The built environment and its elements are a part of the landscape and cannot be considered in isolation from its characterisation. Their contribution to local distinctiveness must be understood in the context of the landscape character types set out in Chapter 02.
2. History shows us that the countryside of the AONB is not a static, fossilised museum of a bygone age, but a dynamic environment where people live and work, and which is as subject as any city to the social, cultural and economic pressures that force change.
3. Local distinctiveness at a regional level cannot be defined by reference to a simple lexicon of built or constructed features. Many variations in character occur across the area of the AONB, which embraces places as different as Bredon Hill and the slopes around the city centre of Bath. This diversity should be recognised and celebrated.
4. The part played by the built environment in defining local distinctiveness can be categorised in terms of settlement, boundaries, and roofs and walls. Each of these themes are best understood in terms of typology, form, location and detail.
 - **Settlements** can be categorised according to their size and the facilities they contain, ranging from market towns to individual buildings. Their 'internal' form can be described as linear, radial, organic or planned: their 'external' form is a product of the skyline and edge detail. Generic locations for settlements in relation to typology and form can be defined in terms of landscape character type. Details include things like village crosses, mounting blocks, sheep washes, bridges and boundary stones.
 - **Boundaries** of many types exist within the AONB, though dry stone walls and hedges predominate. Formally, it is important to distinguish between boundaries within settlement and those that subdivide the wider landscape, and to recognise the subtle stylistic variations that exist within types. It is also important to understand that boundary treatments associated with fields and farmland are not generally appropriate for use within settlements. Dry stone walls are only found where stone is close to the surface, and the distinctiveness of the landscape of the AONB stems from a subtle balance between walls and hedges, not the dominance of one or the other. Gates, stiles and other details are crucial to the special character of a boundary.
 - **Roofs and Walls** are the elements that play the greatest part in defining the distinctive appearance of buildings within the AONB. Traditionally, roof coverings would have been stone slates or thatch, though other types of roofing material also occur, especially in areas that were accessible to the canals or railways. Stone is the predominant walling material, though it is important to appreciate the importance of its natural colour and texture, and the way in which its surface is finished. Render, brick and timber framing also make a noticeable contribution to local distinctiveness in certain well-defined areas, though it is quarrying that sets the tone. Traditional roof and walls tend to be of simple form, their nature determined by technical limitations and construction techniques. The details that 'finish' a wall and make it truly distinctive relate mainly to the junctions and openings that are an essential part of vernacular architecture.

5. The contribution of detail to local distinctiveness cannot be defined at a regional level, and hence must be the preserve of Village Design Statements, Conservation Area Appraisals, Parish Maps and other documents that can be used to record information and provide micro-level guidance.
6. Economics and redundancy of use or function mean that a number of the key features that contribute to local distinctiveness are at risk of loss. Form of settlement, details within settlements, dry stone walls in the landscape, gates and stiles, stone slates, and thatch have all been identified as at risk. Strategies in mitigation must recognise the need for rural diversification, education and fiscal support.
7. The consideration of the potential impact of change on the countryside shows that, although change cannot be prevented, it can be steered in certain directions. It is up to all those that value the character of the AONB to work in partnership with those that administer all aspects of its landscape, the common aim being to ensure that change can take place without eroding the special qualities of the area.

One often hears it stated that the countryside is today going through a period of rapid and painful change, the result of factors that range from the policies of the European Union and market forces, to the effects of BSE and Foot & Mouth. However, the countryside has always been a place of change, and the rural economy has always responded to change with foresight and vigour, and that this is the very reason why the landscapes we now cherish appear as they do. There is no reason why the future should be any different.

The Cotswolds AONB might be designated as an area of 'natural' beauty, but it is really the product of millennia of human endeavour, and will always be so. Hence the need to understand the landscape: The human pressure for development within those parts of England that are perceived to be 'special' presses harder than ever; it would be all too easy for thoughtless endeavour to destroy those very qualities that are considered by many to be so desirable. Hence the need to understand the past and the present, before being able to point to ways in which change can occur without loss of distinctiveness.



WHERE TO NOW?

