

Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Local Distinctiveness and Landscape Change

Produced for the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Partnership
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This report was commissioned by the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Partnership in 2002. Its aim is to assist a wide range of persons broaden their understanding what it is that makes the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty different from other parts of the country (e.g. the Chilterns or the Shropshire Hills), 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.

A brief introduction to the report describes the area, defines what is meant by an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and sets out the purpose of the project, its methodology, scope and limitations.

Landscape Character

This chapter introduces the idea of landscape characterisation, placing the area within the context of national guidance and presenting a synopsis of a recent assessment of the landscape of the AONB that has been undertaken in parallel with this project.

The Evolution of the Cotswolds AONB Landscape

Having presented an over view of the landscape of the AONB, its historical dimension ('time depth') is described with reference those social, cultural and economic forces that have shaped what is seen today. The histories of farming, forestry and woodland, quarrying and delving, transportation, and settlement and built form are all explored, before being summarised by way of an illustrated 'timeline'.

The Built Environment

Key themes that contribute to the local distinctiveness of the built environment (and hence to the area of the AONB) are identified and discussed in terms of their typology, form, location and details:

- **Settlement:** The importance of the internal and external form of the various types of settlement found within the area (market towns, compact villages, etc.) is examined in relation to where they are located in the landscape (e.g. valley bottom, hillside), the results being tabulated in terms of the nineteen landscape character types that have been identified as being present within the bounds of the AONB.

- **Boundaries:** Walls, hedges and other types of boundary are looked at in terms of whether they occur within settlements, parkland or farmland. Maps showing the distribution of dry stone walls and hedges in the landscape are presented.
- **Roofs and Walls:** The use and treatment of materials forms the main thrust of this part of the report. Maps showing the distribution over the AONB of different types of roof covering and various types of walling are included, emphasising the historical importance of quarrying in defining the character of the area.

Elements at Risk and Strategies for Recovery

This chapter looks briefly at built elements that play a crucial part in maintaining local distinctiveness but are at risk of being lost (or have already been lost). Strategies that could mitigate loss are outlined, and the issues arising summarised.

Interpretation of Tradition

Simple examples of how change and local distinctiveness are not incompatible are presented in the form of some possible designs for unequivocally modern elements in the rural and urban landscape - a metal gate and a bus shelter.

The Changing Countryside

The report ends with a series of 'what if' scenarios, illustrating the potential impact of an assortment of changes on the countryside of the AONB.

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.
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.

The report concludes that one must understand the past and the present, before being able to point to ways in which change can occur without loss of distinctiveness.



1.01

The Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

The Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) covers the most prominent and well known section of the outcrop of oolitic limestone that runs north and north-eastwards from Lyme Bay in Dorset to the North Yorkshire Coast. Its most dramatic aspect is along the prominent scarp that faces north-west over the Vales of Berkeley, Gloucester and Evesham, its south-eastern part dipping gently into the rolling wolds and river valleys of the Upper Thames and the Avon. Though devoid of any settlement larger than market towns, the deeply incised nature of the scarp provides the dramatic setting for 'fringe' towns such as Bath and Stroud. Other towns are in close proximity and good roads mean that the area is easily accessible to the populations of Bristol, London and the West Midlands. Although most often associated with the county of Gloucestershire, the AONB actually falls within the administrative boundaries of a further four counties, two unitary authorities and ten district-level authorities. Numerous parish councils and a variety of other organisations also have a stake in the area.

1.02

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

The primary purpose of AONB designation is the conservation of natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage, an idea enshrined in the *National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act of 1949*. This distinguishes them from the wilder, more dramatic landscapes of the National Parks where the objectives of outdoor recreation, and the understanding and enjoyment of the public are as equally important. 41 tracts of nationally significant countryside have AONB status. The Cotswolds area was designated in 1966 with revisions to its boundary confirmed in 1990.

1.03

Purpose of Project

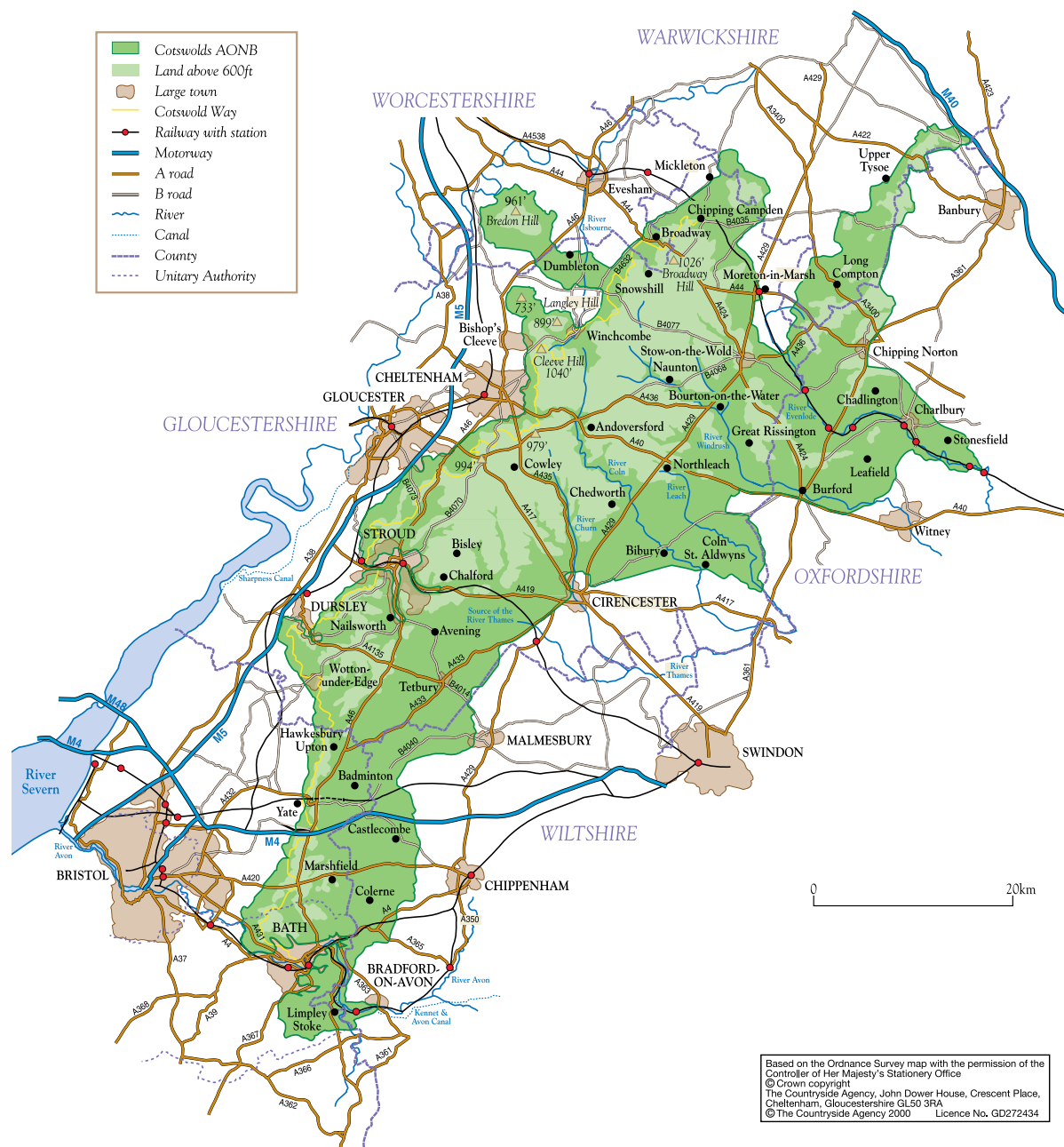
The project was commissioned by the Cotswold AONB Partnership in September 2002, its purpose being to assist a wide range of persons in broadening their understanding what it is that makes the area 'special', and distinguishes it from (say) the Chilterns or the Shropshire Hills. Its output - this report - is seen as providing a link between the highly technical content of a Landscape Character Assessment (refer Chapter 2.00) and the detailed guidance that is published by local authorities to supplement local planning policy, exemplified by documents such as design codes and Conservation Area Appraisals. The report can therefore be seen as having an affinity with the idea

of a Countryside Design Summary, a document that outlines important general features that contribute to the character of the countryside and settlements within a particular area: in this case, a region spread over 2,038 square kilometres of western England. More specifically, the report provides a framework and a set of pointers that can be used to inform the preparation of a Village Design Statement, a community-rooted document that describes the character of an individual village, and which can be used to guide change. This is not to say that it provides a detailed account of all parts of the AONB. It is simply a source of information for all those who live, work in or visit the area, and who have an interest in the character and development of its landscape.

1.04

Methodology

Research for the project commenced with a desk-study of available literature on the history and topography of the Cotswolds AONB, out of which emerged a series of 'themes' that started to suggest how the built environment played a part in defining local distinctiveness. The results of this work were distilled into a questionnaire that was circulated to all local authority conservation officers, landscape officers and other interested parties, and which formed the basis of interviews that 'teased out' local knowledge that could be used to re-evaluate and refine the outcome of the desk study. A parallel programme of research and inquiry explored the evolution



MAP 01: THE COTSWOLDS AONB AND ITS ENVIRONS (COURTESY OF THE COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY)

of the landscape of the AONB and how it might change. Finally, the results of the research were tested and supplemented by an extensive programme of fieldwork, the results of which provided the basis for the maps in Chapter 4.00.

1.05 Scope and Limitations

An area as large as the Cotswolds AONB contains a wide array of built and constructed features, reflecting the minutiae of its topography and historic development. To research and document every one of these features (or even a large proportion) would be a monumental

task, and is beyond the scope of this report. Indeed, one of the key ideas that underpins its structure is that local distinctiveness at a regional level cannot be defined by a simple lexicon of 'features'. Only at the level of a settlement or a locality do things such as the style of a window, the shape of a gable, or a particular pattern of a gate play a major part in what makes a place special. Nor can this report deal with topics such as elements at risk and the changing countryside in anything other than the most cursory detail. Hence the need for Village Design Statements, Conservation Area Appraisals and Parish Maps to pick up its threads.

