

Introduction

The Cotswolds was designated as an AONB in 1966, in recognition of its special landscape character. The outstanding natural beauty of the area is derived from its remarkable visual unity, and yet scenic diversity. The unifying factor is, of course, the underlying geology.

The Influence of Geology

The Cotswolds form the best-known section of the extensive belt of Jurassic Limestone that stretches across England from Lyme Bay in Dorset to the North Sea, in North Yorkshire and Lincolnshire. It is in the Cotswolds in particular, however, that the surface expression of the Jurassic Limestone is so well represented. Not only has it determined the structure of the dramatic landform, but has also strongly influenced the pattern of man's progressive occupation of the land, and the form and appearance of settlements and buildings, and the unique vernacular architecture.

A Rural Idyll

The Cotswolds landscape has long been perceived as a rural idyll. Many of the features associated with this cherished landscape evoke strong images, particularly the dramatic escarpment and expansive high wolds, the network of limestone walls, beech woods clothing the escarpment, and secluded valleys and valley bottom meadows. The built environment is also very evocative ranging from the charm of the many picturesque villages and historic small towns to the individual houses, churches and mansions, and historic landscaped parks. Together these create a strong perception of harmony throughout the area. Despite this unifying pattern of common elements, however, a great variety of landscapes can be observed, each displaying distinctive patterns of landform, vegetation, and landscape elements.

The sense of long occupation of this landscape by man is particularly potent. Neolithic long barrows and chambered tombs occupy prominent locations. A series of impressive Iron Age hill forts hug the hill-tops and promontories along the escarpment. Evidence of long periods of agrarian activity is indicated by remnants of ancient field systems, cultivation terraces, fine examples of ridge and furrow, and the enclosure of the extensive sheep walks. A remarkable network of Roman roads crosses the Cotswolds focusing on Bath, Cirencester and Gloucester. These are all testimony to man's progressive occupation of, and unity with the landscape.

The settlements are also evidence of a symbiotic relationship with the landscape, with the effects of water, shelter and soils dictating settlement location and form. And of course there is the local building stone, derived from the underlying and readily available bedrock, resulting in an organic and harmonious relationship with the land. Stone walls constructed from locally excavated quarries or 'delves' reinforce the sense of local identity.

Landscape Character Assessment

This landscape character assessment provides a detailed review of the Cotswolds AONB landscape. The study has been undertaken in accordance with the most recent guidance and methodology set out by the Countryside Agency. The guidance recognises that **all** landscapes matter, not just those that are particularly well known or evoke strong images. The assessment acknowledges that each landscape character type and landscape character area has a recognisable and consistent pattern of elements that makes it different from another. Character makes each part of the landscape distinct, and gives each its particular sense of place, regardless of perceptions of quality or value. The assessment will provide a new descriptive map of the AONB that draws attention to the contrasts in landscape character that is so often taken for granted.

Landscape Strategy and Environmental Guidelines

Following on from the Landscape Character Assessment of the Cotswolds AONB, a subsequent study has been undertaken in respect of a Landscape Strategy and Guidelines for the AONB.

By building on the findings of the *Cotswolds AONB Landscape Character Assessment*, the *Cotswolds AONB Landscape Strategy and Guidelines* provides an overview of the forces for change that are influencing the landscape, and outlines a series of landscape and land management strategies to help guide change in a positive and sustainable way.

It is hoped that the findings of both reports will provide a useful tool in the decision making process and allow the Cotswolds AONB Partnership, together with other agencies, developers and local communities, to find new ways of managing change and delivering regeneration which protects landscape character and promotes local distinctiveness.



1.1

Appointment and Brief

In October 2002 the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Partnership together with the Countryside Agency appointed Landscape Design Associates (LDA) to carry out a Landscape Character Assessment of the Cotswolds AONB with supporting Guidelines. The overall study consists of two separate reports, comprising the *Cotswolds AONB Landscape Character Assessment* and the *Cotswolds AONB Landscape Strategy and Guidelines*.

1.2

Purpose of the Cotswolds AONB Landscape Character Assessment

The principal purpose of the Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) is to replace the existing 1994 Landscape Assessment and Guidelines undertaken by ADAS, and adopted by the Cotswolds AONB JAC in 1996. This new LCA provides the opportunity to re-assess the AONB under current baseline information, including more comprehensive digital data, and emerging conditions and forces for change. It also represents the first full landscape character assessment of the Cotswolds AONB to be undertaken within the framework provided by the National Landscape Typology, and employs the most up-to-date methodologies for landscape character assessment¹, in accordance with recently published Countryside Agency Guidance. The findings will be used to inform the emerging AONB Management Plan, the preparation of which is a statutory requirement of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act, 2000, and to provide a basis for responding to consultations, guiding management and developing landscape and environmental projects.

Although the Cotswolds AONB LCA will supersede the 1994 ADAS assessment, more recent landscape character assessments have been undertaken by a number of the AONB Partnership Authorities, with findings available for those parts of the local authority area that extend across the designated area. These form an integral part of the Development Plan for the local authority to which they pertain, and a number have been adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance. The considerable depth of work that has been undertaken for these separate assessments is acknowledged, together with their detailed examination of local distinctiveness. Wherever appropriate the Cotswolds AONB LCA has drawn on their findings to inform the AONB wide assessment. A further review of

the current Partnership Authority LCAs, and their relationship to the Cotswolds AONB LCA, is discussed in Section 1.5.

This landscape assessment adopts a holistic approach and considers the Cotswolds AONB as a mosaic of different landscape types and character areas, each with particular characteristics and subject to particular forces for change. The overall aim of this assessment is to provide a detailed understanding of 'the Cotswolds' landscapes, the forces that have shaped them in the past and those that continue to shape them. This understanding will inform a series of strategies and guidelines to help direct future management of the landscape.

The landscape character assessment has the following main **objectives**:

- to provide an assessment of the character, distinctiveness and qualities of the Cotswolds AONB, including cultural and natural heritage resources and to identify and describe the AONB's component landscape character types and landscape character areas;
- to summarise the key characteristics associated with each landscape type to inform the principles in respect of landscape change and guidelines; and
- to promote awareness of landscape character in the AONB, and the importance of landscape conservation, enhancement and restoration.

Although not a requirement of the brief, the study also provides a basis for demonstrating the Countryside Agency's new landscape character assessment guidance, and to test and refine the draft national typology.

¹ Countryside Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage (2002) Landscape Character Assessment Guidance, CAX 84/F

1.3 Approach and Methodology

The study has been completed in accordance with the most up-to-date methodology in respect of landscape character assessment². The main tasks were:

- a detailed review of the various Landscape Character Assessments within and immediately surrounding the Cotswolds AONB, including an examination of their relationship to current Countryside Agency Landscape Character Assessment Guidance, 2002, and the extent to which they can be used in informing the Cotswolds AONB Landscape Character Assessment;
- familiarisation with the study area through information gathering, GIS interrogation and overlay mapping. A list of the core data sets used is attached as *Appendix 1*. Example field survey forms are presented in *Appendix 2*;
- background research into the physical and cultural attributes of the landscape and ongoing forces for change and development pressures;
- site survey including completion of field survey forms for landscape character types and landscape character areas, mapping of landscape character types and landscape character areas, and preparation of a digital photographic record. Core GIS datasets were interrogated in the field using a lap-top computer;
- consultation with stakeholders to assist the team in understanding forces for change and perceptions of landscape character;
- incorporation of the results of all relevant existing and parallel studies from the Cotswolds including existing landscape character assessments, as illustrated on *Figure 3* and *Figure 4*; and
- report and digital map preparation.

Flow diagrams of the assessment process, including the process employed as part of the *Cotswolds AONB Landscape Strategy and Guidelines*, are presented in *Appendices 3* and *4*.

². Countryside Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage (2002) Landscape Character Assessment Guidance, CAX 84/F

³. Countryside Commission (1990) The Cotswold Landscape, CCP 294

1.4 The Scope and Context of the Study

The study area is shown on *Figure 1*. It includes the entire Cotswolds AONB. A townscape assessment has not been undertaken as part of this project, and built up areas in the AONB are therefore regarded as an integral part of the landscape they occupy.

The assessment includes a description of the physical (geology, landform, drainage and soils); natural (trees, woodland and land cover); and cultural (archaeology, history, land use, enclosure patterns, settlement patterns and building styles) attributes of the landscape. An appraisal of past and present perceptions of the area, including those of national and local artists, musicians and writers did not form part of the brief. An excellent summary of artistic and cultural responses may be found in an earlier assessment of the Cotswolds AONB³.

Characterisation in Practice

Characterisation is the process by which areas of distinctive character are classified, mapped and described. In this assessment landscape character types and landscape character areas have been identified. Landscape character types are distinct types of landscape that are relatively homogeneous in character. They are generic in nature in that they may occur in different parts of the country, but wherever they occur they share broadly similar combinations of geology, landform, drainage patterns, vegetation, and historical land use and settlement pattern. By comparison, landscape character areas are unique and geographically discrete, sharing characteristics of the broader landscape type to which they belong.

An important feature of the character assessment process is that it is objective; no judgement of a particular landscape's value or quality is made. However, particular attention is given to identifying characteristics that are distinctive, rare or special.

1.5 AONB Partnership Landscape Character Assessments

As a precursor to the Landscape Character Assessment and Guidelines, the brief required a key initial report to be prepared to provide a comprehensive examination of the various landscape character assessments that have been undertaken across the whole or part of the AONB. This included an evaluation of their consistency or otherwise; and their relationship to current Countryside Agency Guidance.

The former Countryside Commission publication *'The Cotswolds Landscape'* (1990), and the 1994 ADAS report, are the only studies that apply to the whole of the designated area. The remaining LCAs comprise studies undertaken by the various Partnership Local Authorities, and therefore apply to land that lie both within and beyond the AONB. In addition to these 'overlapping assessments', the study also considered the findings of LCAs that extend up to, and in the vicinity of but beyond the designated area, in order to provide an understanding of the wider context and setting of the Cotswolds AONB.

The findings of this initial study are available in a separate report, entitled *'Review of Partnership Landscape Character Assessments'*. A summary of the principal findings and issues arising from the report are discussed below.

- The existing and emerging LCAs across the AONB provide a comprehensive range of data on the landscape resource of the section of the designated area to which they apply. There are differences between each of the LCAs, however, as they have been undertaken at different times and in accordance with methodologies and guidance current at that period, address a varying range of scales, and have used differing hierarchies and descriptions of landscape divisions. While the majority of the more recent assessments have identified landscape types, some are confined to landscape character areas. As a consequence, a direct comparison and cross-reference between the various assessments has been difficult. It was notable, however, that a number of the assessments have been undertaken to a detailed level, both at a County level, in the case of Worcestershire County Council, and for a number of the District and Unitary Authority assessments. Furthermore, others have involved considerable public consultation, particularly in the case of South Gloucestershire and Bath & North East Somerset Council's assessments.
- The Countryside Agency has completed a National Landscape Typology for England based on the comprehensive overlaying and interrogation of digital data in respect of physiography, land cover and land use. Because it has been derived from desk assessment only, the typology is draft, and requires more detailed refinement through further desk study to a more detailed level, and field verification. Importantly, it provides a basis for the longer-term resolution of disparities that exist between neighbouring and overlapping assessments. Through the consistent reference to the draft National Typology, all new landscape character assessments can work to a common 'top tier' of assessment that is progressively refined and adjusted through detailed local assessment and landscape type

and area boundary determination. Integral to Countryside Agency Guidance, the intention is that all future assessments refer to the National Landscape Typology, in the same way that the National Countryside Character Areas also provide the first reference point. Eventually the whole country will have a verified net of national types within which different levels of assessments can nest and share common boundaries.

- The Gloucestershire county typology study undertaken in 2002 has worked directly within the framework of the National Landscape Typology and provides an assessment of the county landscape types to draft status, prior to verification by field analysis. The existing Worcestershire LCA, the emerging Oxfordshire LCA, and the more detailed work currently being digitised for the Warwickshire Landscapes Guidelines, are based on the system of Land Description Units (LDUs), which form the smallest geographical units as described in the 'Living Landscapes Project' (LLP). As the authors and promoters of the LLP also prepared the draft National Landscape Typology for the Countryside Agency, there is a direct linkage of the LLP and delineation of LDUs to the draft National Landscape Typology.
- With the exception of the Gloucestershire draft county typology study, 2002, and the Oxfordshire County Council LCA, none of the existing assessments have been undertaken since the issuing of the Countryside Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage's LCA Guidance in 2002. More recent assessments have referred to the Interim Guidance published in 1999.
- The boundaries of the landscape types and areas that have been determined for each of the Partnership LCAs provide an essential reference for checking against, and correlating with the findings of the new Cotswolds AONB assessment. As a consequence of the different scale and perspective of the Cotswolds LCA, however, it is inevitable that variations between the boundary determinations, divisions of landscape character areas and types, and descriptions, may occur. Wherever possible, these variations and differences have been resolved through dialogue and consensus.
- A number of the landscape character assessments undertaken by the Partnership Authorities either are, or are in the process of being adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance, or form part of an Adopted Development Plan. The Landscape Character Assessments undertaken by Worcestershire and Warwickshire County Councils, Stroud District Council, and Bath & North East Somerset Council, are all now adopted and reference to their findings form part of the

development plan process for their respective authorities. West Oxfordshire and Cherwell District Landscape Assessments, although not formally adopted, form an integral part of the Local Plan and are a material consideration. The South Gloucestershire Council Assessment has undergone wide consultation, and it is anticipated that it will be adopted as SPG in 2004.

- The relationship of the emerging Cotswolds AONB Landscape Character Assessment with the existing Partnership Authorities' LCAs therefore requires clarification to avoid potentially conflicting decisions where boundary and landscape character type/area descriptions vary between the assessments. It is confirmed that where LCAs are adopted as SPG, or form part of an Adopted Development Plan, these will take precedent over the broader findings of the Cotswolds LCA in respect of the determination of planning and development control matters and decisions, and other detailed considerations. Nevertheless, the Cotswolds AONB LCA will remain as an essential reference document in any decisions to provide a further perspective on the implications of any development, and its effect on the AONB Landscape.

1.6 Parallel Projects and Surveys

The *Cotswolds AONB Landscape Character Assessment* and *Cotswolds AONB Landscape Strategy and Guidelines* has benefited from a number of relevant studies. Details are provided below.

1.6.1 Caring for the Cotswolds: Local Distinctiveness and Landscape Change

Latham Architects were appointed by the Cotswolds AONB Partnership to undertake a parallel study in respect of '*Caring for the Cotswolds: Local Distinctiveness and Landscape Change*'. At an early stage of this assessment, therefore, representatives from LDA and Latham Architects met and agreed opportunities for data sharing and a joint programme of work, having previously identified a significant degree of overlap between their respective briefs.

The '*Caring for the Cotswolds: Local Distinctiveness and Landscape Change*' study has undertaken research in response to the central question – 'What is it that makes the Cotswolds 'The Cotswolds'?', and provided a range of inputs into the landscape character assessment. At a technical level, Latham Architects provided background information regarding the evolution of the Cotswolds landscape and details of built elements in the landscape

such as walls, buildings and other distinctive features. This has been particularly useful where a high degree of technical knowledge has been required to identify local variations in building styles and materials, which is of course of great relevance to the process of describing landscape character. To assist the Local Distinctiveness and Landscape Change study, LDA supplied draft landscape character types in order for research into local distinctiveness to rest within a strong landscape framework. This was in recognition of the fact that elements and features characteristic of the Cotswolds have an iterative relationship to their surroundings. For example, vernacular buildings are often constructed from locally available stone and orientated to take advantage of sheltering hills and local water sources. These, in turn may be observed to display distinctive patterns across the landscape and as such make an important contribution to local landscape character, whether at a type or character area level.

The findings of the project have been incorporated into the relevant sections of the report, notably within Section 3.0 where buildings, settlements and features that contribute to local landscape character are discussed for each of the landscape character types, with examples focused within the landscape character areas.

1.6.2 Other Studies

Two further assessments have made a significant contribution to the landscape character assessment. The *CEH Land Cover Map 2000* illustrates the distribution of particular habitats and land use types across Gloucestershire. Unfortunately this data was not available for the whole of the AONB. However, field observation and analysis of existing landscape character assessments and other relevant datasets enabled for a full understanding of land cover across the study area.

The Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC) of the Cotswolds AONB was also of considerable importance to the landscape character assessment. The HLC study, completed in 1999 and re-evaluated following the recent completion of the Gloucestershire Landscape Character Assessment, reveals how the present landscape is a result of various historic processes and that it contains many features and elements that reflect aspects of its evolution.

The findings of these independent studies were made available at an early stage of the assessment and proved invaluable in the mapping and description of landscape character types and landscape character areas.

1.7 Structure of the Report

The landscape patterns evident today have evolved gradually over thousands of years both through natural and human forces. In recognition of this, **Section 2** describes the principal influences that have shaped the landscape in the AONB. Important geological, cultural, historic and natural features are recorded, and their distribution across the AONB is described. More recent changes in the landscape since 1945 are also examined. These provide a link with the subsequent report in respect of Landscape Strategy and Guidelines, in which current and future Forces for Change are examined in more detail.

Section 3 presents a review of landscape character across the Cotswolds AONB, and a classification of the 19 landscape character types and 68 landscape character areas.

For each landscape character type a description of the key characteristics, landscape character and physical and human influences have been prepared. It is important to acknowledge that it is only through a detailed understanding of landscape character, and characteristics such as landscape scale, geology, habitats, field and settlement patterns, historic land use patterns and vernacular building styles, that guidance on how the landscape may be able to accommodate future change can be prepared. A summary of the features particular to each of the Landscape Character Areas is also included.

Written descriptions avoid value-laden terminology, such as beautiful, bland, attractive and degraded. In this way, the descriptions can help to raise awareness of an area's distinctiveness and encourage appreciation of variations in character across the AONB, without reference to subjective judgements on the relative value of each of the landscape types.

Section 4 of the report comprises a **glossary** of key terms, and is followed by **Section 5**, which lists the core references. Finally, **Section 6, Acknowledgements**, identifies members of the steering group, officers within the AONB Partnership local authorities, and other stakeholders and consultees, all of who made valuable contributions to the character assessment.