

## 12 DIP-SLOPE LOWLAND VALLEY

### Character Areas

- 12A Upper By Brook Valley
- 12B Lower Coln Valley
- 12C Lower Leach Valley



### Key Characteristics

#### Upper By Brook

- Narrow, deeply incised sections along the Upper By Brook and its tributaries;
- extensive areas of broadleaved woodland including ancient woodlands, and intermittent coniferous plantations interspersed with species rich grassland cloak steeper valley slopes bordering the By Brook and its tributaries.

#### Thames Tributaries (Coln and Leach)

- Well-defined valley form with convex slope profile at transition onto the adjacent Dip-Slope Lowland landscape;

- progressively shallower and more open valley form within the lower reaches;
- pronounced valley meanders, and interlocking spurs;
- rivers meander through flat alluvial valley bottoms that become progressively wider towards the lower reaches of the valley;
- linear belts of mixed and broadleaved woodland follow steeper landform and often extend up to the river edge. These often combine with hedgerow and hedgerow trees to create the impression of a well-wooded landscape.

#### All river valleys

- Intimate, small scale, settled landscape with landform and woodlands restricting long views out of the valley;
- predominance of open pastoral farmland of improved grassland interweave between intermittent wooded slopes and along valley bottoms, together with pockets of arable land, particularly on the shallower slopes;
- sequence of stone built villages occupying secluded locations in valley bottoms, often in association with a bridging point and on valley sides;
- occasional farmsteads within the more open valley sections linking to farmed areas on the adjacent Dip-Slope Lowlands;
- limited road network within valleys, generally confined to a single valley side road, or routes that cross the valley at long established bridging points; and
- some areas of the valleys, including tributary valleys, retain a remote rural character and are only accessible on foot.

### Landscape Character

The Dip-Slope Lowland Valleys are a distinctive element within the broader Dip-Slope landscape. Whilst similar in many respects, the valleys forming part of the Thames catchment are generally shallower, less deeply incised and less wooded than those draining the Dip-Slope Lowland to the Avon and eventually into the Severn.

River valley water meadows and floodplain pastures are characteristically flat or very gently undulating with gently sloping land on either side. The sheltered, intimate, small scale wooded and pastoral pattern of the valleys contrast with the more open and exposed expanses of the Dip-Slope Lowland landscape, although the transition is generally harder to define where valley slopes are gentle and woodland cover not extensive.

Historically the lush, sheltered valleys have been intensively settled and the focus of communication routes. However, centuries of activity have obscured many of the remains of early activity. In contrast to shallower soils on the Dip-Slope Lowland, rich alluvial deposits in the valleys support fertile land for productive pasture farming. On drier land, most typically on the gentler valley slopes, arable farming predominates and adds seasonal variations in texture and colour to the otherwise verdant valley pastures.

The distinctive character of the valleys is in part a product of the woodland cover, with significant blocks of broadleaved woodland combining with riverside trees, and overgrown valley side hedgerows, to give the landscape a distinctly wooded character in some sections, and particularly within the By Brook Valley. A number of woodlands are ancient, particularly those on upper valley slopes and areas of steep landform.

In addition to riverine habitats, elements of the wider landscape are also of nature conservation value. Woodland, scrub and hedgerows provide cover for wildlife and add a variety of feeding and breeding sites to those provided by wet meadows and areas of tall riverside vegetation. Despite widespread improvement, areas of calcareous and mesotrophic grassland raise the nature conservation value of the valleys. Indeed, a number of SSSIs may be identified, particularly in the steeper valley systems of the By Brook.

Views within this landscape are generally restricted by landform and vegetation and channelled along the floor of the valley. However, from some areas relatively long distance views along the river course are possible, particularly from open valley sides. Farmed slopes and woodlands form a backdrop to many views from the valley floor, with seasonal changes in broadleaved woodlands and occasional arable fields adding much to the visual appeal of the valleys.

### Physical Influences

The Thames tributary valleys that drain the Dip-Slope Lowland, comprising the Coln and Leach, are the lower reaches of the rivers that originate on the High Wold further north. At this lower elevation, their valley profiles are progressively broader and gentler as they approach the Thames Basin.

The Upper By Brook, a tributary of the Bristol Avon, also flows across the Dip-Slope Lowland, but in contrast to the Coln and Leach, this upper section of the river is close to its source in the adjacent High Wold Dip-Slope. The valley form therefore displays characteristics of a juvenile river, with a more deeply incised profile. It is believed that the Upper By Brook valley may at one time have been similar in profile and character to those of the Coln and Leach. However, as the Avon captured it as one of its tributaries, the river has eroded downwards to create its deep valley profile.

The level valley bottoms are formed from alluvial deposits of silty clay, with diamicton evident, forming narrower areas of floodplain along tributary streams. It is through these areas of flat landform that the rivers follow sinuous courses, meandering through the valley floor. The floodplain bordering the Coln and Leach are notably wider than that through which the By Brook flows. This is as a result of their contrasting valley profiles and erosional / depositional histories.

The rivers flow through Jurassic limestone, most notably the Great Oolite Group White Limestone and Forest Marble Formations, evident on upper valley slopes. Historically the valleys have proved a valuable source of building stone and numerous quarry sites may be identified on 1:25,000 mapping although these sites are hard to interpret in the landscape.

The soils of the floodplain are often poorly drained and therefore the valley floor is predominantly un-drained wet pasture grazed by cattle, or even wetland. Particularly important areas of meadow exist in Bibury. Here Rack Isle, a low-lying meadow surrounded by the Coln and Arlington Mill Stream, is a distinctive element of the village and an important wildlife resource. The floodplains at Honeybrook Farm south of Slaughterford are also important and designated as a SSSI on account of the unimproved neutral to calcareous hay meadows and ancient woodlands bordering an undisturbed stretch of the By Brook.

Along the fringes of the floodplain silty soils support fertile land for productive pasture and in some areas, less at risk from flooding, arable farming takes place. On the valley

sides pasture predominates. On some slopes too steep for improvement and heavy grazing, calcareous grasslands survive and are an important nature conservation resource. These may often be found in close proximity to ancient broadleaved woodlands. Indeed numerous SSSIs have been designated on the steep upper slopes of the By Brook Valley including Colerne Park and Monk's Wood, a floristically rich area of ash-wychelm woodland.

Riverside trees such as ash and alder may often be seen in close proximity to the course of the Dip-Slope Lowland rivers. These combine with largely deciduous woodlands and copses to limit views and reinforce the sense of enclosure and intimacy within the valleys, which combined with hedgerows on valley sides, contribute to the sense of a well-treed landscape. Changes in management practice, particularly the overgrown nature of many hedgerows due to lack of management, is reinforcing this sense of enclosure and tree cover giving the impression that the landscape is more wooded than it actually is. Stone walls are also frequent occurrences within the valleys. However, on the valley bottom, post and wire fences predominate. In places these have become colonised by tall weed and scrub growth, and therefore weaken the robust landscape framework.

### Human Influences

The distribution of Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments along the Dip-Slope Lowland rivers, suggests that similar to other local water courses, they were the focus of settlement in prehistoric times. It is also likely that the valleys were important trade and communication routes and indeed, a number of fortified sites overlooking the valleys may be identified including the Motte and Bailey at Castle Combe above the By Brook and Dean Camp overlooking the Leach.

Despite much earlier origins, many of the valley settlements were established in the Saxon or medieval periods. Place names and their geographical locations indicate that crossing points were the natural locations of many settlements. Indeed two villages on the By Brook contain the element 'ford' indicating the importance of the crossing point in the evolution of these settlements.

Many villages are located on the gentle valley slopes above the main course of the river or adjacent to the rivers and dispersed villages often have a distinct linear form. However, dispersed villages and hamlets with a radial form can also be identified at major crossing points, such as Bibury and Arlington.

Dip-Slope Lowland Valley villages and hamlets are generally small and quiet. The historic layout of the core of many villages, coupled with the vernacular building styles and materials, adds significantly to their visual appeal and character. As a consequence, some have developed into popular tourist destinations, such as the villages of Bibury and Castle Combe. Stone churches are often associated with these villages although they are not often at the centre, instead occupying a peripheral location close to the river channel.

Roads tend to run along the upper slopes of the valley or along the mid slope above the level of flooding. Occasional major routes cross the rivers at long established bridging points. Beyond the villages, many stretches of the valleys are inaccessible by motor vehicle and can only be reached on foot. Many areas are also in private ownership and not accessed by public footpaths, giving many areas a remote character.

### Character Areas

#### 12A

#### Upper By Brook Valley



The valley is drained by the upper section of the By Brook, which is fed by a number of small tributaries arising from springlines on the steep upper slopes. The Upper By Brook flows along the valley floor and into the lower section of the By Brook in Character Area 4D (Lower By Brook Valley), before entering the River Avon at Batheaston. The valley and its tributaries have deeply dissected the surrounding area of Dip-Slope Lowland to the north and west and the Cornbrash Lowlands to the east and as such contrasts with the gentler valley profiles of the Dip-Slope Lowland Valleys further to the north. The main valley is relatively narrow with steep sides containing the fast flowing By Brook, with the tributary valleys being smaller in scale, and narrow with

steeper sides. Whilst a number of tributaries are apparent as small streams, others are only wet flushes on the upper slopes. Alluvial deposits within the main and tributary valleys form flat valley bottoms.

Land use within the valley is dominated by pastoral land with areas of scrub and rough pasture located below woodland that dominates the upper slopes and valley rim. Hedgerows are the main boundary feature, and on upper slopes they are often gappy with tall, mature hedgerow trees. However, stone walls can be found along roadsides and within close proximity of settlements. Overall the valley is generally well wooded and consists mainly of broadleaved species, many of which are designated as ancient woodland. There are a number of significant coniferous blocks, however, including woodland to the east of Marshfield and to the west of Ford and Upper Pickwick. Although the majority of woodland is located on the upper slopes it tends to run along the course of the stream, in particular in the tributary valleys and this, along with the steep landform, creates a strong sense of seclusion. Interspersed between the areas of woodland, mainly on the upper valley slopes adjacent to surrounding areas of Dip-Slope Lowland, are areas of calcareous and mesotrophic grassland such as an area located at West Yatton Down Nature Reserve. South of Castle Combe, it is likely that such grassland has developed as the result of woodland removal. The areas south of Castle Combe are also designated as SSSIs, along with woodland south west of Castle Combe, West Yatton Down Nature Reserve and a significant area south of Slaughterford, which includes ancient meadow pasture systems and ash-wychelm wood.

Settlement within the valley includes the villages of Castle Combe, Ford and Slaughterford, which nestle in the valley bottom adjacent to the By Brook and a limited number of scattered dwellings, again located on the valley bottom and lower valley slopes. Connecting the development within the area is a network of minor roads, confined mainly to the valley floor although a number of roads extend up the valley sides surrounded by high banks and trees, often cloaked in ivy. The A420 is the only main road to pass through the valley at Ford before extending along the upper valley slopes south of North Wraxall. A number of the tributary valleys are accessible only on foot, and although minor roads are often within close proximity, there is a strong sense of rural seclusion. Stone is the dominant building material. This is evident not only in the dwellings and stone walls but also in the construction of arched bridges, in particular around the village of Castle Combe.

Although historic remains are limited within the valley, the close proximity of fortified sites, most notably on the edge of Castle Combe, demonstrate that the area has

been settled, and associated with a controlled route through the landscape, for a significant amount of time. During the 15th century the close proximity of flowing water and sheep grazing on the valley sides was a catalyst for the development of the weaving industry, and with it came the construction of weaving cottages, many of which can still be found throughout the valley.

## 12B

### Lower Coln Valley



The Lower Coln Valley Character Area extends from the village of Coln Rogers south-eastwards to Coln St Aldwyns and Hatherop, and includes a small tributary valley that extends north-eastwards from Ablington Downs to Calcot Peak Farm. In common with the Middle Coln Valley, the course of the Coln continues to flow across the White Limestone of the Great Oolite. As a consequence of the river erosion through the Oolitic Limestone series, limited exposures of the Forest Marble Formation in the south of the character area occur on the west side of the river valley.

Although the valley form is well-defined, it is generally less deeply incised than in the upper sections of the valley. There are exceptions, however, notably the very steep slopes on the outer bends of the valley meanders that occur at Bibury, and further upstream at Ablington. At the transition with the High Wold Dip-Slope the valley lies just below 160 m AOD falling progressively south-eastwards to 130m AOD at the southern perimeter, at the boundary of the AONB.

Land use along the valley is predominantly pasture although areas of arable production also occur principally on the upper flatter areas of the valley slopes at the transition onto the adjacent more expansive Dip-Slope Lowland. Fields are generally rectilinear and medium in size although smaller irregular fields occur in the edge of the villages.





There is an intermittent cover of woodland within the valley mainly confined to the valley bottom and lower slopes, which gives a locally well-wooded character. In contrast, however, there are many open sections. Much of the woodland is broadleaved or mixed, with stands of ancient woodland to the west of Coln St Aldwyns, and at The Grove south of Bibury on the slopes rising above a prominent valley meander. The valley also supports some limited areas of calcareous grassland notably within the tributary valley north-east of Ablington Downs. An area of mesotrophic grassland to the south-east of Winson is designated as a SSSI.



This section of the valley is generally well settled with a succession of stone built valley bottom villages along the length of the valley, located at bridging or fording points, and frequently including a mill. The most notable of these is the linked settlement of Bibury and Arlington, a popular haven for visitors to the Cotswolds. Here, the combination of the weavers cottages of Arlington Row, Arlington Mill, and the island of rough wet grassland known as 'Rack Isle' on which the woven cloth was set out to dry on racks, combine to form an evocative image of cottage industry in the Cotswolds.

There are some interesting archaeological and historical features within the valley that are indicative of a long period of occupation of these sheltered Dip-Slope Lowland valleys. Substantial earthworks associated with the Rawbarrow Settlement are located on the upper east facing valley slopes overlooking Ablington. This is designated as a SAM, as are the remains of a Roman Building adjacent to the Coln immediately to the south of Bibury. The Elizabethan house of Bibury Court (now a hotel) is also a notable historic building.

The southern section of the character area, encompassing the village of Coln St Aldwyn, has a well-defined parkland estate character. Two historic parks are located in close proximity to each other, comprising Hatherop and Williamstrip Parks. The extensive parkland extending across the rising valley slopes with avenues, mature parkland trees and copses, grazed open pasture, and an enclosing structure of substantial areas of estate woodlands, combine to create a distinctive setting to the valley bottom stone built villages.

## 12C

### Lower Leach Valley

Within the Dip-Slope Lowland the River Leach flows southwards from the southern side of Lodge Park, before assuming a south-easterly course to the village of Southrop and the boundary of the AONB. A series of small secondary valleys feed into the river, many of which are dry. The most notable tributary valley rises from a spring south of Sherborne Park within the High Wold Dip-Slope, with an intermittent watercourse flowing south to the village of Aldsworth and subsequently into the Leach.

In common with other Dip Slope Lowland rivers the Leach flows across the Great Oolite; below Eastleach Martin, however, exposures of Forest Marble are increasingly prevalent especially on the west bank of the valley and





adjacent to the wider valley bottom. The valley form varies from some notably incised sections to more gently sloping valley profiles, notably south of Lodge Park and also in the lowest part of the character area as the valley approaches the Thames Basin.

Between Dean Camp and the linked villages of Eastleach Turville and Eastleach Martin the valley displays a classic example of 'underfit river morphology' (see Section 2.4) with valley meanders up to ten times greater than stream meander wavelengths. Pronounced interlocking spurs and intermittent woodlands cloaking the valley meanders further emphasise the remarkable landform.

Land use within the valley is predominantly pastoral within regularly enclosed fields, although some areas of arable occur south of Lodge Park in the vicinity of Cocklebarrow Farm. Much of the pasture is improved, but there are isolated pockets of calcareous grassland east of Kilkenny Farm. Woodland cover within the valley is generally limited and confined to small rectilinear valley edge woodlands. There are, however, some notably larger stands within the deeply meandering section of the valley (see below). Much of this is broadleaved.

In contrast to the Upper / Middle reach of the river, settlement within the Lower Leach is notably sparse. From Lodge Park at the head of the character area to the Eastleach villages, a distance of some 12 km (7.5 miles), much of the valley is very remote with substantial sections detached from roads or footpaths. It is only in the lowest part of the area that settlements occur with the valley bottom villages, with the close succession of Eastleach Turville and Martin, Fyfield and Southrop, and the network of local roads and footpaths all contributing to a more settled character to the valley. The village of Aldsworth is located within the principal tributary valley of the Leach adjacent to the B4425 Burford to Bibury Road.

The earthworks associated with Dean Camp on the upper valley slopes to the south-east of Aldsworth is evidence of earlier occupation of the valley. This Iron Age feature is designated as a SAM. The line of the Roman road Akeman Street is also evident at the crossing point over the river.