

14 CORNBRASH LOWLANDS

Character Areas

- 14A Biddestone Lowland Farmland
- 14B West Malmesbury Lowland Farmland



Key Characteristics

- Flat or very gently undulating landform with occasional low hills;
- occasional wide views over productive farmland limited only by small farm copses and woodlands;
- vertical elements such as hedgerow trees and pylons gain visual prominence;
- network of tributary streams draining eastwards occupy shallow valleys with course of narrow streams marked by alder and other wetland tree species;
- fertile soils derived from the Cornbrash Formation bedrock;

- predominance of arable farming together with some pastoral land mainly bordering water courses;
- medium to large scale rectilinear fields with intermittent hedgerows and occasional stone walls;
- dispersed settlement pattern of mainly nucleated villages, hamlets and farms;
- infrequent woodland cover of mainly geometric broadleaf and coniferous plantations;
- network of principal roads surround or cross the area but have limited effect on the quiet settled rural character; and
- quiet rural lanes bordered by tall hedgerows, narrow grass verges and drainage ditches that weave through the landscape.

Landscape Character

The Cornbrash Lowlands landscape type extends beyond the eastern perimeter of the Cotswolds Dip-Slope Lowland. Within the boundary of the AONB, the areas of land classified as Cornbrash Lowland is very limited, and confined to two separate sections in the vicinity of Biddestone and immediately to the west of Malmesbury.

An examination of the wider context of the landscape that adjoins the Cotswolds AONB provides a better understanding of the setting of the designated area and the potential effects arising from landscape change and development within these adjacent landscapes. Therefore the descriptions below apply to areas of Cornbrash Lowland Landscape Character Type within the AONB, but consider their wider landscape setting.

The Cornbrash Lowlands form a transition from the South Cotswolds Lowlands area of Dip-Slope Lowland to the flatter and more open landscapes to the south-east, beyond the AONB. The area forms part of the catchment of the upper River Avon and its tributaries, which have dissected the area to form a subdued, gently undulating topography with occasional very low hillocks rising above the general landform. The rich and fertile soils derived from the underlying Cornbrash Formation that extends across the area, support a land use focused on arable cultivation, together with more limited pastoral areas, principally utilising wetter areas of land bordering water courses. The area has a predominantly rural character derived from the expanse of cultivated arable fields, and a dispersed pattern of small villages, hamlets and farms. Intermittent woodlands, mainly geometric in form, and comprising both broadleaved, and mixed coniferous and broadleaf trees, extend across the area. These provide local enclosure and landmarks within an otherwise undistinguished agricultural landscape.

A small number of towns and major roads are located within or bordering the boundary of the Cornbrash Lowlands. However, despite these factors, the landscape retains a quiet rural character.

Physical Influences

The Cornbrash Lowlands are confined to the south-eastern section of the AONB and represent a transition between the more elevated Dip-Slope Lowland to the west and the extensive and flatter agricultural landscapes to the east. The landscape shelves gently from west to east, dropping just 30m over a distance of as much as 2km (1.2 mile) and is generally perceived as being flat or only very gently undulating.

The landscape is underlain by Cornbrash Formation, the youngest rock within the Great Oolite Group. Cornbrash consists of a coarse, crumbly shelly limestone and outcrops on the perimeter of the Upper Jurassic Oxford Clay. The limestone is overlain by brown marl that produces a particularly fertile and friable soil well suited for arable farming and crops such as corn. Indeed the name of the rock relates specifically to its suitability for arable farming and was in usage in the 18th century. The Cornbrash is of little value for building or road-making, although it is used locally.

West of Malmesbury the area is drained by the upper reaches of the River Avon and its tributaries, at the commencement of the Avon's tortuous course eastwards, southwards and then westwards, eventually re-entering

the southern part of the Cotswolds at Bradford-on-Avon. These watercourses, together with the Avon's tributaries further south and west of Chippenham, have dissected the area to create a gently undulating landform. While occasional small hillocks rise above this lower lying terrain, such as Lan Hill to the east of Biddestone, the general topographical form is subdued. This makes the course of rivers and streams often difficult to trace in the wider landscape except at crossing points or where their course is marked by riverside trees and linear belts of woodland.

As would be expected on the Cornbrash, arable fields predominate. These are often located in large or moderately sized fields and are enclosed by a network of generally well-maintained hedgerows and occasional stone walls. Some of the larger fields may have been created by a process of field amalgamation and hedgerow removal. Improved pastures are generally located along the course of the main watercourses such as the Avon.

In this managed agricultural landscape, there are few areas of nature conservation interest. However, small remnant areas of unimproved mesotrophic and calcareous grasslands survive bordering the Tetbury Branch of the River Avon.

Some larger stands of woodland are located to the north of the M4 in the vicinity of the settlements of Pinkney Park. Elsewhere intermittent smaller woodland blocks permeate the farmed landscape providing local landmarks. These comprise a mix of coniferous plantations and broadleaved woodlands, including some areas of ancient woodland on the steeper southern banks of the Sherston Branch of the Avon.

Human Influences

In common with the Dip-Slope Lowland to the west, it is likely that this landscape has been occupied since the Neolithic period. However, the time layers of occupation and successive patterns of land use and land management have largely been removed or integrated into the field patterns created by the enclosure of the land that occurred in the 18th and 19th centuries. It is this that has had the most significant effect on landscape character, with the resultant strong pattern of medium to large regular fields that extends across the area. It is also to this period that many of the areas farm houses and impressive barns date.

Settlement within the Cornbrash Lowlands is confined mainly to compact hamlets, although examples of dispersed villages and hamlets can also be found. Scattered throughout the landscape are a number of farmsteads and individual buildings.

The course of the Fosse Way is a significant historic landscape feature although this is now preserved only in the course of field boundaries and footpaths. To the east of Easton Grey, a former villa site marks the point where the road crossed the Sherston Branch of the Avon. Other less tangible traces of early occupation also exist, most notably the earthwork within Whitewalls Wood; strip lynchets on the steep banks of the Avon; and a mound in woodland to the north of Hartham Park.

The area is surrounded or crossed by a network of major roads, notably the A4(T), A420, A350, and the A429 that bypasses Malmesbury. The east-west routes of the M4 and the Swindon to Bristol main line railway also pass within close proximity of the area within the Dip-Slope Lowland Character Type. Despite the local impact of these principal routes, the area retains a quiet, rural character focused on agriculture.

Character Areas

14A

Biddestone Lowland Farmland



The character area forms the western part of a local watershed between the By Brook Valley to the west, and the series of streams that flow eastwards into the River Avon, at or in the vicinity of Chippenham, located immediately east of the AONB. The gently domed and undulating landform supports a rural farmed landscape of predominantly arable and some pastoral fields. The area is crossed by the A420, together with a network of minor roads. Despite the impact of these principal routes, the area retains a quiet, rural settled character with occasional nucleated villages, notably Biddestone, West Yatton and Yatton Keynall, together with a pattern of dispersed farms. Well-maintained, neat hawthorn hedges enclose fields and border roads where they are located on banks above ditches. Although not



generally frequently found in the area, stone walls are located in the vicinity of Hartham Park. Housing surrounding the Park display details that are intricate and ornate.

Biddestone is the main settlement within the character area, and possibly dates back to the Saxon period when the village was founded by a Saxon settler named Beida. It has a compact form looking onto a village green. Many buildings date to the early part of the 18th century and were built from the profits of the wool trade. These, along with the ancient church, utilise the local warm grey stone. The walls are mostly built of rubble-stone, occasionally coursed and embellished with ashlar quoins and copings. The local stone also appears in garden walls and outbuildings and the great stone barns that are reached along narrow hedged lanes that radiate out from the village westwards towards the Upper By Brook Valley.

Woodland cover is generally sparse but there are a number of small, predominantly geometric areas of coniferous plantations to the south east of Biddestone. These provide some enclosure and local landmarks within this otherwise undistinguished but gentle rural farmed landscape.

14B**West Malmesbury Lowland Farmland**

This character area to the west of Malmesbury comprises part of the valley of the upper reaches of the River Avon, into which flow a number of small tributaries. Slope orientation and the general grain of the gently undulating or shallow falls of the landform have been largely determined by this drainage pattern. Thus to the north and south of the river, there is a general fall to the south-east and north-east, respectively. This is a quiet rural area dominated by arable farming although improved permanent pastures are prevalent in low lying areas bordering river channels. Fields are generally medium to large scale enclosed by hedgerows with hedgerow trees. These provide strong vertical elements within an otherwise flat landscape. A number of woodlands extend across the southern side of the River Avon and comprise a mix of small geometric coniferous farm plantations, and broadleaved woodland in the vicinity of the River Avon. A number of these are ancient in origin. Parkland trees and shelter belts contribute significantly to woodland cover in the character area, with three parks located in close proximity to each other bordering the Sherston section of the Avon valley.

In view of the limited extent of the character area, settlement is sparse and confined to the hamlets of Foxley Green and Easton Grey and the village of Brokenborough which is located at the northern perimeter of the character area. All are sited at crossing points over the river. At Easton Grey, for example, a cluster of whitewashed rubble stone houses are located adjacent to the stone bridge that crosses the river. Beyond these small villages, settlement consists of isolated farms. To the east the ancient town of Malmesbury borders the character area. It occupies a natural strongpoint on a hill almost entirely surrounded

by the Avon, which the Saxons occupied at an early date. It is close to their castle that an Irish monk Maildolph formed a hermitage in 642 AD, which was later to become a monastery in 676 AD.

On the northern perimeter of the character area, the presence of a Romano-British Settlement and an earthwork provides evidence of earlier occupation of the area although few other traces remain.

