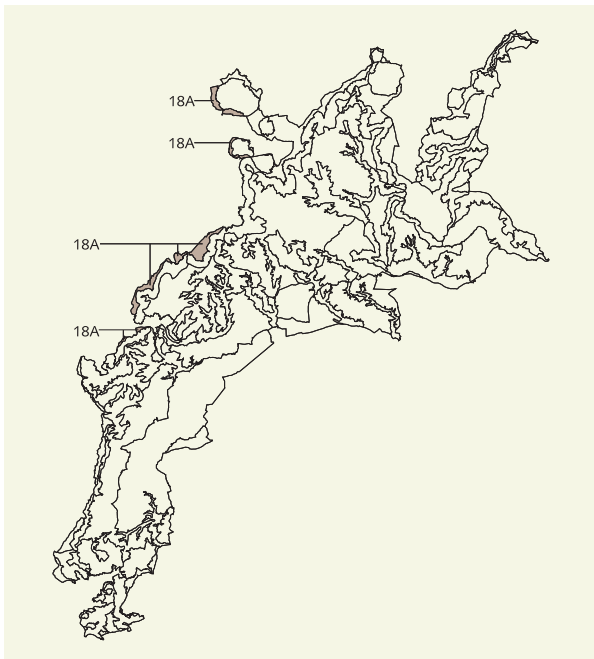


18 SETTLED UNWOODED VALE

Character Areas

18A Vale of Gloucester Fringe



Key Characteristics

- Soft gently undulating landform, with lower escarpment slopes forming a transitional area between the vale and escarpment;
- Cotswolds Escarpment defines the eastern limit of the Vale and provides a dramatic backdrop to vale settlements and landscapes;
- mixed arable and pasture land use with occasional orchards;
- well maintained hedgerows forming a strong landscape pattern;
- limited woodland and ancient woodland cover;

- quiet winding lanes linking villages, hamlets and farms at the foot of the escarpment;
- varied mix of building materials, including use of brick, timber and stone, and slate and thatch roofing, but with Oolitic Limestone still prevalent within the vale villages in closer proximity to the Cotswolds Escarpment;
- proliferation of modern 'suburban' building styles and materials;
- major transport corridors through vale;
- rural areas bordered by large urban and suburban areas and interspersed with commercial and industrial uses; and
- widespread network of pylons and transmission lines.

Landscape Character

The Settled Unwooded Vale landscape character type extends along the western perimeter of the Cotswolds, northwards from Dursley and Cam to the southern fringes of Bredon Hill. The main section, however, lies beneath the escarpment between Cheltenham and Stonehouse. Within the boundary of the AONB, the area of land classified as Settled Unwooded Vale is limited, confined to a narrow section of the landscape type at the base of the escarpment, merging into the broad lowland Vale of Gloucester that extends westwards to the floodplain farmland landscapes bordering the Severn, as well as the transition to the Vale of Evesham to the north. In view of the peripheral location in relation to the vale beyond, the key characteristics identified for the landscape type are not always typical of those that occur within the heart of the more extensive vale area. There is also a transition from this landscape type, where the influences of large urban

areas and major infrastructure are more dominant, to the adjacent Unwooded Vale (Landscape Character Type 19), which is more rural in character.

In the southern part of the AONB, the landscape character assessment undertaken by South Gloucestershire Council provides a more detailed examination of the landscape types that occur across the wider vale to the west of the Cotswolds escarpment, together with the mosaic of landscape character areas. Similarly, Worcestershire County Council's LCA provides a detailed examination of landscape types that occur across the Vale of Evesham Regional Character Area, including the land that extends into the AONB in the vicinity of Bredon Hill. To avoid any confusion or contradiction with the findings of these more detailed landscape character assessments, the landscape character area that occurs within the AONB Settled Unwooded Vale landscape type is named separately to differentiate it from those identified and described within the detailed LCAs.

The following description is principally confined to the transitional lowland 'edge' landscape that occurs below the escarpment and escarpment outliers. Where appropriate, reference is also made to the characteristics and features that occur within the adjacent Vale of Gloucester, including the significant built elements, in order to provide the context and linkage with this wider landscape type.

The Settled Unwooded Vale within the AONB is underlain by Lias Group mudstones and sandstone, which in places are overlain by extensive areas of drift deposits creating a soft, gently undulating landscape. This is cloaked in a regular patchwork of arable and pasture fields enclosed largely by neat hawthorn hedges and as such the agricultural landscape is typical of the wider vale. Woodland cover is restricted to a limited number of deciduous farm copses although field and hedgerow trees can give the impression that this is a well treed landscape.

Landscape and settlement patterns are heavily influenced by industrial age and modern development both in the villages and in neighbouring urban areas such as Gloucester, Stonehouse, Quedgeley and Cheltenham. Thus landscape character shows a mixture of agricultural, urban, suburban and industrial land uses.

Transportation routes and infrastructure elements to the west have a strong influence on the landscape. The principal route is the M5 although dual carriageways, a number of other major roads and bypasses are also responsible for eroding rural landscape character bordering transport corridors. Mainline and branch railways also occupy the wider vale landscape and introduce noise and movement to the landscape.

Notwithstanding these urbanising features, the Settled Unwooded Vale landscape type retains areas that have a strongly rural character with an emphasis on agricultural management.

Physical Influences

Much of the Vale of Gloucester Fringe is underlain by the mudstones of the Blue Lias and Charmouth Mudstone Formations. This geological framework, along with isolated drift deposits of sand and gravel, form a gently undulating landscape that shelves gently westwards from 100m AOD within the AONB boundary to 50m AOD. The eastern extent of the vale is marked by the distinct break of slope at the foot of the escarpment where more hummocky land resulting from landslips may be identified. The western limits of the Settled Unwooded Vale are defined partly by the Floodplain Farmland landscape types that extend along the course of the Severn at or below the 10m AOD contour.

Within the wider lowland vale a number of small low hills are evident. At Bondend to the east of Upton St Leonards a fine example of a vale hillock has been identified. Here Dyrham Formation Silty Mudstone forms an east-west orientated hill. The solid geology is similar to that on the escarpment to the east and therefore the hill, which rises to just 110m AOD from the vale level of approximately 50m AOD, represents a small outlier.

A high number of brooks and streams drain neighbouring slopes and upland areas through the wider vale to the Severn. The Frome is a significant river running east-west through the escarpment and the vale and is fed by narrow tributary streams that occupy shallow, winding valleys, often marked by linear belts of willow and other wetland tree species.

The type is characterised by a mosaic of improved grassland and arable land with small areas of neutral grassland. Woodland is largely absent although numerous small farm copses are conspicuous. Hedgerow and field oaks contribute significantly to local landscape character and help maintain the rural character of some areas by screening views to urban and suburban features. Stonewalls also create a number of field boundaries within the landscape type.

Improvements made to agricultural land and the proximity of urban areas limits the nature conservation value of the landscape although important habitats are found in the stream valleys. Hedgerows, dotted with hedgerow oaks and ash, are also important habitats and provide a network through which wildlife can move.

The landscape is perceived as being more intimate and sheltered in close proximity to the escarpment. Further to the west, and particularly beyond the course of the M5, the declining influence of the scarp slopes, flatter land, generally larger field patterns and fewer woodlands, give the landscape a more open character.

Human Influences

Similar to the Unwooded Vale there is only scattered evidence suggesting that the Settled Vale landscape was heavily utilised and inhabited in the prehistoric period. However, following the Roman invasion and the advance of the army into Wales under Scapula (AD 47-52) the vale landscape came to prominence, with the Twentieth Legion establishing itself at Gloucester in AD 49. Roman roads were quickly constructed to link the fort, and later the city of GLEVM and designated as a 'Colonia' AD97, to the wider Roman world. The principal route shared the course of the modern A38 through the vale that linked Gloucester to AQUA SVLIS (Bath) in the south, and SALINAE (Droitwich) in the north. The colonia developed suburbs and a thriving port on the river.

Within the wider Vale of Gloucester villages, many having their origins in the Saxon period, grew throughout the medieval period taking increasing areas of land into their open fields, remnants of which can occasionally be found as surviving tracts of ridge and furrow. The historic cores of many of these vale settlements contain medieval buildings that are largely half-timbered although many have now have been infilled with brick, or have a brick facade. A number of older buildings are also constructed of Cotswold stone. These are often clustered around medieval churches that are also built of stone, the materials of which were obtained from Cotswolds quarries and brought to the vale by packhorse. The spires and towers of these churches gain visual prominence in the lowland landscape and are important landscape features. The most prominent is the 15th century tower of Gloucester Cathedral, which acts as an orientation point in the lowland vale.

Larger vale settlements such as Gloucester continued to grow throughout the industrial period, displaying evidence of this in the rows of 19th century terraced houses, and occasionally mills, that have survived demolition. In contrast to settlements elsewhere in the Cotswolds, the vale settlements took advantage of good transport links (the Severn, numerous roads, canals and railways) for the import of building materials such as bricks and slate for roofing. Cheltenham and Gloucester also contain fine examples of Regency architecture, the distinctiveness of the buildings much enhanced by the locally available fine Cotswolds limestone used in their construction.

Post industrial and modern urban and suburban sprawl has had a profound impact on the landscape, in terms of physical change to land use and landscape patterns, the built environment, transport and infrastructure. The main north-south route through the Vale of Gloucester established by the Romans still persists, its course closely followed by the M5 motorway, the mainline railway between Bristol and Birmingham, and the Gloucester and Sharpness Canal. Apart from the visual impact of the transport infrastructure, the further effect of traffic noise and movement, lighting elements and nightglow also impact on the adjacent rural areas that extend into the AONB. The Roman route up the escarpment to Cirencester is also evident and is now occupied by the busy A417(T). Urban fringe sites close to major transport routes are often the site of industrial units and trading estates.

Beyond the main towns and villages the wider settlement pattern is restricted to dispersed hamlets, mainly linear in form and a small number of isolated farms and roadside dwellings. Whilst scattered across the Vale landscape, settlements have mainly developed in valley bottoms or on locally elevated land. The close proximity of the major towns of Gloucester, Cheltenham and Stroud, and their outlying suburbs such as Stonehouse, Leonard Stanley and Brockworth has, however, had a dramatic impact on local landscape and settlement character. For example, farm diversification has responded to and exploited the proximity of large local populations, leading to a proliferation of 'horsiculture' features across the rural landscape such as stables, ribbon fences, lighting and jumps. The close proximity of towns is also manifested in the proliferation of urban 'roadscape' features and light industry sites.

Buildings also reflect the influence of large towns, with suburban building styles such as rendering and mock Tudor additions, and materials extending out beyond the limits of the town into local villages, and may often be found in isolated dwellings and hamlets such as those in and surrounding Little Witcombe.

Even where urban influences are not obvious in rural areas of the landscape, the character of the Settled Unwooded Vale retains influences from neighbouring urban development. Such influences are often associated with the proliferation of masts and overhead transmission lines, and more subtly, from the effects of lighting.

Character Areas

The Vale of Gloucester Fringe is the only landscape character area in the Settled Unwooded Vale landscape character type in the AONB. The text above therefore applies to this single Character Area.