

7 HIGH WOLD

Character Areas

- 7A Nymphsfield and Kingscote Plateau, & Minchinhampton Common
- 7B Bisley Plateau
- 7C Cotswolds High Wold Plateau
- 7D Rissington Plateau and Milton Downs
- 7E Rollright and Chastleton Plateau
- 7F Over Norton Plateau
- 7G Edge Hill Ironstone Plateau



Key Characteristics

- Broad, elevated, gently undulating plateau area dissected by a network of dry valleys with distinctive convex profile valley sides;
- expansive long distance views across the open plateau, and to distant hills beyond the Severn Vale;
- elevated areas of plateau surrounded by deeply incised valleys;
- predominantly arable land use with some improved pasture/grass leys, and very limited permanent pasture mainly confined to valley bottoms;

- large scale, regular fields mainly enclosed by dry stone walls, together with hedgerows with very occasional hedgerow trees, and post and wire fencing;
- small to moderate size geometric farm woodlands, many comprising small coniferous and broadleaved plantations and shelterbelts, and plantations bordering roads;
- settlement limited to small stone built villages and hamlets, generally within valleys, and isolated farmsteads and individual dwellings;
- network of mainly linear roads following ridge tops, and linking settlements;
- evidence of long period of occupation of the land;
- seasonal rotation of arable cropping patterns and improved grassland interrupts otherwise homogenous and simple land cover;
- remnants of once more extensive commons survive on the fringes of the escarpment;
- occasional active and disused limestone quarries located across the High Wold; and
- use of locally quarried stone for both walls and houses, frequently constructed in distinctive local vernacular.

Landscape Character

The High Wold landscape type comprises the plateau landscape to the east of the escarpment. The principal area of High Wold extends from the north of Stroud and then sweeps north-eastwards to Chipping Campden and to the west of Bourton-on-the-Hill. There are, however, a number of smaller and physically separate sections of High Wold where the plateau has been deeply dissected by valley

systems leaving smaller fragments of a once more extensive expanse of plateau. Thus, a plateau area extends across Nymphsfield and Kingscote, with a smaller fragment at Minchinhampton, and a further area extends northwards from the Frome Golden Valley to Birdlip. Further remnants of the plateau area occur to the east of the main expanse of High Wold, in the vicinity of Rissington and Milton Downs, between the Windrush and Evenlode Valleys, and to the east and west of Chipping Norton.

The High Wold plateau is generally an expansive, large scale, windswept landscape. Its elevated position allows long distance views over wide areas, and in areas of limited woodland cover a sense of exposure persists. Locally, however, tree cover provides some seclusion and limits views across the plateau and beyond to neighbouring landscape types. Despite being fragmented by the deeply incised valleys that have been cut into it, long views over them give the impression of a cohesive plateau.

The principal section of the High Wold is characterised by an extensive upland plateau with a level or gently undulating landform dissected by a network of predominantly dry valleys with distinctive convex form valley slopes. The plateau lies at approximately 250m AOD but localised high points rise to over 300m AOD on the western perimeter of the High Wold, close to the escarpment edge. The smaller detached sections to the south-west and east of this main plateau are physiographically part of the High Wold, and share similar characteristics to the main expanse of wold plateau. Nevertheless there are local variations, particularly in the east. These are addressed in the Character Area descriptions. The descriptions below in respect of landscape character, and physical and human influences, principally apply to the main plateau.

Land cover is predominantly arable farmland with some improved pasture, and more limited areas of permanent pasture. A pattern of large-scale regular fields extends across the area mainly enclosed by a network of dry stone walls, together with hedgerows but few hedgerow trees, and post and wire fences. Many sections of the stone walls on the plateau are in poor state of repair, often exacerbated by the presence of hedges that have naturally regenerated adjacent to stone walls, obscuring the presence of stone walls, and contributing to their progressive collapse. Hedgerows are most frequent in the network of dry valleys, but they are also found across many areas of the plateau. Occasional limited areas of common land remain, supporting calcareous grassland, along with other limited areas of calcareous grassland scattered across the High Wold.

There is a pattern of small to moderate size geometric woodlands across the High Wold, many comprising coniferous copses and shelterbelts and frequently located within or on the perimeter of the valleys. Plantations bordering roads also occur, together with occasional larger plantations. Very few of the woodlands are ancient. Where present the woodlands provide a sense of enclosure and a backdrop to the wide panoramas.

Large areas of the High Wold have a sense of elevation and openness, with expansive views across the countryside. Indeed from the highest point on the High Wold at Cleeve Common views are possible beyond the Malverns to the Wrekin and Titterstone Clee 72 km (45 miles) away. Despite the intensive arable farming of the area, there is a sense of remoteness and space, enhanced by the dominance of sky within the broad vistas.

Settlement within the High Wold is sparse, and confined mainly to small villages and hamlets of a dispersed character within the more sheltered valleys. The exception is the small town of Stow-on-the-Wold, which is located on the High Wold plateau and has been a favoured meeting place since the Roman times. Across the more open plateau settlement is confined to a pattern of isolated farmsteads and individual dwellings. A network of direct roads crosses the area, generally following ridge tops and linking the principal settlements.

The presence of long and round barrows on the western perimeter of the High Wold is evidence of occupation of the land since the Neolithic period. These may have once been more widespread, but many may have been destroyed by antiquarians, or 'ploughed out'. More recent features that have an influence on landscape character are remnants of both large and small scale disused quarries, as well as a few active quarries. The open plateau has favoured the establishment of large commercial horse stables and associated gallops, while at settlement edges the presence of more domestic scale horse management is evident. The elevated land has also resulted in the siting of occasional but prominent telecommunication and other infrastructure features.

The underlying geology has had a fundamental effect on the High Wold's character and sense of unity, determining not only the landform, drainage pattern, soil characteristics, and hence land use, but also expressed in the colour and local source material for the stone walls and buildings. This close interrelationship has created a strong sense of harmony. Within the muted golden hues of the limestone, however, the agricultural land use has superimposed a mosaic of seasonal change of colours and textures derived from the rotation of ploughed land and

arable crops. Despite the distraction of these verdant and colourful tones, the unifying effect of limestone and expansive scale is still dominant.

Physical Influences

The principal section of the High Wold is underlain by the Inferior Oolite Series of the Middle Jurassic, and comprises the denuded remnant of the upper section of the uplifted and gently tilted Jurassic 'whaleback' dome, with strata dipping south-easterly at a very gentle 1-2°. In the extreme north-eastern section of the AONB, the Oolitic Limestone is replaced by older rocks of the Lias Group. Here, the resistant Marlstone Rock Formation underlies the distinctive but narrow section of High Wold plateau that extends eastwards beyond the Edge Hill escarpment.

The main section of the High Wold forms a broad plateau at approximately 250m AOD but localised high points close to the escarpment edge rise above these general levels to 330m AOD at Cleeve Common, for example, and 319m AOD east of Snowhill. In contrast to the broad expanses of the Limestone High Wold, the Marlstone Rock High Wold Plateau in the north east is lower, at approximately 200m AOD.

Numerous streams have dissected the plateau to form a complex network of convex interlocking hills and dry valleys, forming the upper reaches of the more substantial river valleys that flow in a generally south-easterly direction across the Dip-Slope and Dip-Slope Lowland. The valley systems can be attributed to processes in action during the cycle of Quaternary Ice Ages when glacial melt waters from the retreating ice sheets dissected the plateau area and Dip-Slope creating deep valley forms.

Soils derived from the Oolitic limestone are thin and light calcareous loams. They are often full of stones, hence the term 'stone brash' used by 18th century agricultural specialists. The permanent pasture that once extended across much of the plateau was well suited to such soils, but during the last century the light soils have been able to accommodate the conversion to arable farming, and focus on grain production and oilseed rape, with productivity reliant on the application of fertilisers.

The thin calcareous soil has also influenced the tree and woodland pattern. Seldom is there sufficient soil depth on the High Wold for self-sown saplings to establish, and almost all trees in the landscape have been planted. Indeed many date from the previous two centuries and the period of enclosure, resulting in a 'planned' character. A pattern of geometric and linear plantations and shelterbelts prevail, many of which are coniferous. Smaller copses at field

corners and coverts also occur, some surrounding former quarry sites, together with boundary planting adjacent to roads. Hedgerow trees are uncommon. Some of the older plantations and copses are declining with little evidence of management. While small areas of broadleaved and ancient woodland are present, these are generally within more sheltered valleys and on steep slopes, or in association with isolated patches of calcareous grassland.

As a result of the extensive agricultural 'improvement' and ploughing up of much of the High Wold, old pasture and calcareous grassland is now confined to a few dry, deep valleys, and commons on the edge of the plateau such as Cleeve Common, Charlton King's Common, Minchinhampton and Rodborough Commons, and Selsey Common. Where the High Wold borders the steep slopes of the escarpment, remnant calcareous grassland merges with rough grazing. These grasslands are often noted for the various species of flora and fauna that they support, and many contain important rarities such as orchids and the Cotswold Pennycress.²¹

Human Influences

Archaeological evidence suggests that the High Wold has been extensively cleared of trees since the Neolithic. A series of Neolithic long barrows and chambered tombs, such as Belas Knap and Hetty Peglar's Tump, together with later Bronze Age round barrows, are located along the top of the escarpment within and on the perimeter of the High Wold. It is generally considered that these were established as highly visible symbols and territory markers for communities that were probably living in the more sheltered valleys of the High Wold and Dip-Slope to the east. Clearance of the woodland to ensure visibility of these features, as well to enable cultivation of the land to support these early sedentary, farming communities, would therefore be in progress.

Valleys with permanent springs within the High Wold would have been favoured areas for permanent settlements. While evidence of these early settlements no longer exists, the assumption is that they are simply buried beneath contemporary Cotswolds villages and hamlets that continue to take advantage of the favourable shelter and sources of water. Dispersed villages and hamlets occur most frequently across the High Wold, although examples of more compact settlements can also be found. The form of settlements does, however, vary greatly to mainly include linear, radial and organic developments.

²¹ Josceline Finberg (1977) *The Cotswolds*

Both large and small scale quarries, existing and disused, are significant features of the High Wold and testimony to the importance of the bedrock as a source of building material over many centuries. The creamy buff coloured Inferior Oolite has historically been quarried for buildings stone and can be observed in numerous villages on the High Wold where it has weathered to form gold and grey buildings which are mottled with white and yellow lichens. Freestones and Peagriffs provide particularly good building stone especially the Yellow Guiting Stone, which weathers to a rich golden colour. This was quarried at Coscombe Quarry above Stanway, and Bourton-on-the-Hill.

As well as the remains of larger quarries, the landscape is covered with numerous small-scale local quarries or 'delves' comprising surface excavations, and often no more than a shallow depression, and providing material for stone walls and perhaps a few local buildings. Today, small copses or plantations often mark the location of a former quarry, with names such as 'Slatepit Coppice' and 'Limekiln Plantation', west of Salperton.

The combined effect of the progressive introduction of lifehold tenancies for farmers, and the 18th and 19th century Enclosure Acts and parliamentary division of the landscape, is central to interpreting the current pattern of farmsteads, field pattern and woodlands within the High Wold. With enclosure of large tracts of open 'common land', and the establishment of a new rectilinear field pattern, and 'enclosure' roads, farmers were able to consolidate their holdings, build or extend farmsteads and establish woodlands for shelter. The principal pattern of woodland and roadside planting therefore dates from this period, although newer plantations have been introduced in more recent years. Effectively the present day High Wold landscape dates to this time, although in the early years following Enclosure, the landscape would have been much bleaker, as newly planted shelterbelts and copses would have been in their infancy.

Despite almost total enclosure of the landscape, areas of common land have survived, largely along the escarpment, on high land too exposed or steep for tillage. Their importance to local people cannot be underestimated. At Bisley, for example, enclosure was resisted in 1733 by handloom weavers who kept a horse or donkey to carry yarn or finished cloth to and from the mills on the common. These remained as open, unenclosed landscapes and are often noted for their ecologically important grasslands and well-preserved archaeological features, such as hillforts and barrows. Their good condition is a result of their not being ploughed for arable farming.

Today, a mechanised, and in parts, industrial scale farming dominates the landscape. Earlier evidence of the unenclosed landscape is largely gone except for a few remnant commons. Settlement and farmstead locations are largely unchanged.

Character Areas

7A

Nympsfield and Kingscote Plateau, & Minchinhampton Common



The area of High Wold to the south-east and north of Nailsworth comprises a narrow and gently sloping plateau in two sections, separated by the Nailsworth Valley. The western section in particular has a very convoluted form projecting up to the edge of the escarpment, and enclosing a number of distinctive and deeply incised valleys.

The larger western section extends as far west as Nibley Knoll, with its prominent monument in memory of William Tyndale. Further 'fingers' of the plateau contain the Uley, and Tyley and Ozleworth Bottom valleys and surround the settlements of Uley and Wotton-under-Edge, while to the east of this section further 'fingers' contain valleys to the east of Nailsworth. One of these, comprising the secluded and deeply wooded Woodchester Park, is particularly notable. (LCA 5B)

There is considerable evidence of former occupation of the area, with a succession of long barrows, and forts hugging the high wold edge along the perimeter of the escarpment. The spectacular Iron Age fort at Uley Bury is particularly notable.

This western area is generally sparsely populated although two plateau top villages occur at Nymphsfield in the north and Kingscote to the south. A simple line of ridge top roads crosses the area. A single wind turbine is also notable at Lynch Knoll, east of Nymphsfield along with a prominent communications tower north east of Wotton-under-Edge. Woodland cover is generally sparse although fields are expansive and predominantly under arable cultivation.

The eastern section of this Character Area comprises a narrow section of elevated plateau between the Nailsworth Valley to the west, and Frome Valley to the east above Brimscombe. This flat-topped plateau area, rising to just over 200m AOD, is small in size. It is of considerable importance, however, in view of the areas of remnant common land, comprising Rodborough, Littleworth, and Minchinhampton Commons that are located across the plateau. These support nationally important remnants of calcareous grassland, as well as areas of pasture parkland. Nearly all of the common land is in National Trust ownership, with open access, and an important recreational focus. There are extensive views from the numerous public footpaths that cross the Commons.

7B

Bisley Plateau

Similarly to LCA 7A the Bisley Plateau has a complex and convoluted form, extending across the upland plateau to the west and north of Stroud and as far north as Birdlip. The plateau projects extended 'fingers' of elevated and gently sloping land between a series of steep sided valleys. Unlike LCA 7A, however, the plateau is detached from the main Cotswold escarpment by the re-entrant strike valleys of Painswick and Slad. (LCA 8A) Generally rising above 200m AOD, there are a number of higher 'summit areas' across the plateau, eg 267m AOD north of Bisley, and 303m AOD south of Birdlip. The area has a distinctive open character and although there are a number of nucleated plateau top villages, notably Bisley, Whiteway,



Brimpsfield and Birdlip, it is generally sparsely populated in character. However, located on the edge of the character area, the village of Bussage does have an urbanising influence on the High Wold due to the development of football pitches, schools, allotments and horsiculture. There is much evidence of former occupation of the area including a number of tumuli and long barrows.

A prominent telecommunication mast is located at the extreme western limit of the plateau overlooking the town of Stroud below.

7C

Cotswolds High Wold Plateau



The Cotswolds High Wold plateau comprises the largest section of the High Wold extending immediately east of the head of the Miserden Valley near Birdlip north-eastwards across the plateau to above Chipping Campden and west of Stow-on-the-Wold. The area embraces all the characteristics of the High Wold. Here, the influence of the underlying geology is particularly strongly expressed, from the dramatic, gently undulating, and expansive upland plateau landform, dissected by dry valleys, and light stony soil, through to the harmonious relationship between the network of limestone walls and buildings with their surroundings. The sense of scale and openness is particularly apparent, as well as the effects of an intensive managed agricultural landscape.

Arable farming predominates although improved pastures grazed by cattle and sheep are also in evidence. Fields on the plateau tend to be large and geometric in shape; many are enclosed by dry stone walls and hedgerows, although hedge loss and dereliction of stretches of walls gives the landscape a neglected appearance in places. Indeed in many areas, weakened boundaries are reinforced with post

and wire fencing. Silage bales wrapped in black plastic, and large industrial style sheds close to enclosure period farmhouses, are also a sign of modern agricultural practices and the intensification of agriculture on the High Wold.

Despite the predominantly managed character of the plateau, remnants of former agricultural practices still remain. Cleeve Common is a notable feature of the landscape and is recorded as common land as far back as the Saxon period although it may have been continuously grazed and open from as far back as the Neolithic period. The common represents the largest single area of unimproved limestone grassland in the AONB and has been designated as a SSSI for its botanical and geological importance. A particularly interesting feature is the proximity of calcifuge plants to calcicole species. This is a result of a localised area of sandy soils derived from the underlying Harford Member sandstone, which are acidic in nature and have therefore resulted in an area of heather becoming established. Although once extensive, the cover of heather is now limited.

As is characteristic of the High Wold, woodland cover is not extensive and restricted to small deciduous plantations, walled corner copses and shelterbelts close to farms. Many were obviously planted at the time of the enclosures and are an integral part of the landscape. However, a significant number are modern coniferous plantations and offer little to landscape character. Perhaps the most evocative plantings are those of beech and pine although many are apparently nearing maturity. Few of the woodlands on the Cotswolds High Wold are ancient indicating a long history of clearance and farming. A notable exception, however, is the large area of Guiting Wood, which extends across the plateau into the neighbouring Upper Windrush Valley.



Linear belts of woodland along the enclosure roads are also a characteristic feature. A fine example is the linear belts of woodland bordering the A424, known as Five

Mile Drive in this location. The road dates to 1730 and was constructed over the Bourton Downs. It is a good example of an enclosure road, the main carriageway being bordered by grass verges and low dry stone walls. The stone for building the roads was often quarried from alongside the carriageway and many verges show the humps and hollows left by the diggers. Older routes are also apparent on the High Wold. Many may have their origins in the Prehistoric period although others, such as the Salt Way, originate in the medieval period and were used to transport salt from Droitwich to the Thames.



Within the managed agricultural landscape small areas of rough grassland are apparent, sometimes made more visible by beech plantations. These 'islands' mark the site of upstanding Neolithic long barrows and Bronze Age round barrows and are a significant feature of the Cotswolds High Wold. These sites are scattered across the landscape but are most often located on sites that overlook neighbouring valleys or the escarpment. Many have been eroded and degraded; fine examples such as Belas Knap (Beacon Hill), however, are well-preserved and particularly evocative features. Other prehistoric sites, notably hillforts and boundary ditches such as those on Cleeve Common, are important remnants of the pre-enclosure landscape.

Settlement of the Cotswolds High Wold Plateau is sparse. Enclosure age farmsteads are located throughout the landscape, often some distance from villages and hamlets, and generally located within the shelter offered by valleys draining the plateau such as Notgrove, Shipton and Sevenhampton. A number of deserted medieval villages are also located on the plateau. Abandonment may have occurred for a number of reasons, although the clearance of the high wold landscape to make way for sheep, and also the effect of the plague during the medieval period, are significant factors that may have led to the loss of entire villages.

Telecommunication masts dominate some sections of the High Wold close to the escarpment edge. The cluster of towers south of Cleeve Hill is particularly prominent, and similarly at Shab Hill north-east of Birdlip. The tall structures affect the perceived scale of the escarpment. Pylon lines are also intrusive features across this part of the High Wold, notably on the plateau to the east and south of Cheltenham.

7D

Rissington Plateau and Milton Downs



Rissington Plateau and Milton Downs comprises the plateau top of an area of elevated land contained between the wide valleys of the Evenlode and Windrush rivers. The River Dikler, a tributary of the Windrush, further isolates this area, its north-south course paralleling the Evenlode to the east. Although much smaller than the Cotswold High Wold Plateau to the west, it nevertheless shares many of the characteristics of this Landscape Type, notably the open elevated aspect, with large scale rectilinear fields and limited woodland cover confined to geometric plantations.

Dry stone walls are evident within this area but many are broken or tumbling down, showing evidence of poor management.

The infrastructure and military housing associated with the decommissioned Upper Rissington Airfield is a notable feature. Part of the airfield has now been developed as a Business Park, and occupies a prominent location across the summit of the plateau, together with the new 'village' of Upper Rissington. The Wyck Beacon telecommunication mast at Icomb Hill, at the northern limit of the plateau, is particularly visible in the setting of Mangersbury Hill, and views from the south of Stow-on-the-Wold. A further mast at the eastern limit of this area at Langley is also notable. These features detract from an otherwise quiet rural character.



7E

Rollright / Chastleton Plateau

The north-east / south-west aligned Chastleton and Rollright Plateau is limited in extent, forming a small section of the High Wold plateau between two parallel valley systems. Lying at an average height of 220m AOD, and rising at one location to 247m AOD, land use across the plateau is predominantly open arable fields with some limited mixed broadleaved and coniferous woodland blocks. There are very few stone walls, and many of the fields are enclosed by hedges, or post and wire fences. Hedgerow trees are more common in this area of the High Wold.

Two very distinctive archaeological features are located within this area, comprising the impressive Iron Age hill fort of Chastleton Barrow with its circular rampart planted with trees, and to the west, the Rollright Stones. This remarkable Bronze Age Stone Circle is made up of over seventy stones of Great Oolite, and much eroded and damaged. A detached King's Stone marks the location of the rising sun. The area was obviously held in high regard by the local prehistoric communities as the remains of a Neolithic long barrow, and a denuded Bronze Age burial chamber known as the Five Whispering Knights, are in close proximity. This consists of four orthostats and a single great capstone.



A telecommunication mast located on elevated land at Whichford Hill is a locally prominent feature within the wider landscape. A further mast on the spur between Little and Long Compton is also notable, although partly screened by woodland.

The former Cross Hands Quarry adjacent to the A44, which crosses the plateau, is currently in use as a landfill site. Peripheral earth mounding screens much of the working areas from view. The nearby Rollright Quarry to the north-west is now mainly worked out, but advertised as a supply for walling stone. In both cases surrounding woodland provides some amelioration of their impact.

7F

Over Norton Plateau



The High Wold to the north and south of Chipping Norton comprises two very small sections at the eastern limit of this Character Type. Both areas lie at approximately 225m AOD forming a gently sloping plateau above the tributary valley to the north-west that drains into the Evenlode Valley. The area to the south is typical of the transitional High Wold, with an open agricultural landscape and a strong pattern of regular fields defined by a mix of hedgerows and stone walls.

Although topographically part of the High Wold, the area to the north is centred around the plateau edge village of Over Norton, and is less typical in that much of the area forms part of the setting, and planned planting and woodland associated with Over Norton Park. The area is also dissected by the headwaters of the Evenlode tributary. The proximity of the adjacent large settlement of Chipping Norton is also influential in this northern area in that it contains transitional uses and development typical of the urban fringe.

7G

Edge Hill Ironstone Plateau

In contrast to other areas of High Wold, the Edge Hill Ironstone Plateau extends across the Marlstone Rock Formation, forming a narrow but distinct plateau area above the Edge Hill escarpment. The land is very flat at a height of 215m AOD. The iron rich fertile soils on the plateau support mainly arable farming although areas of pasture also occur. Fields are rectangular and defined by mainly clipped and well-managed hedges with intermittent hedgerow trees. In common with the adjacent Ironstone Hills and Valleys (Landscape Character Type 6) the underlying ferruginous ironstone is very evident in the soil colour and local building stone. Upton House, an impressive National Trust property, is also located within this Character Area. The mature woodland associated with this planned estate influences local landscape character, and provides a sense of enclosure within an otherwise open landscape.

