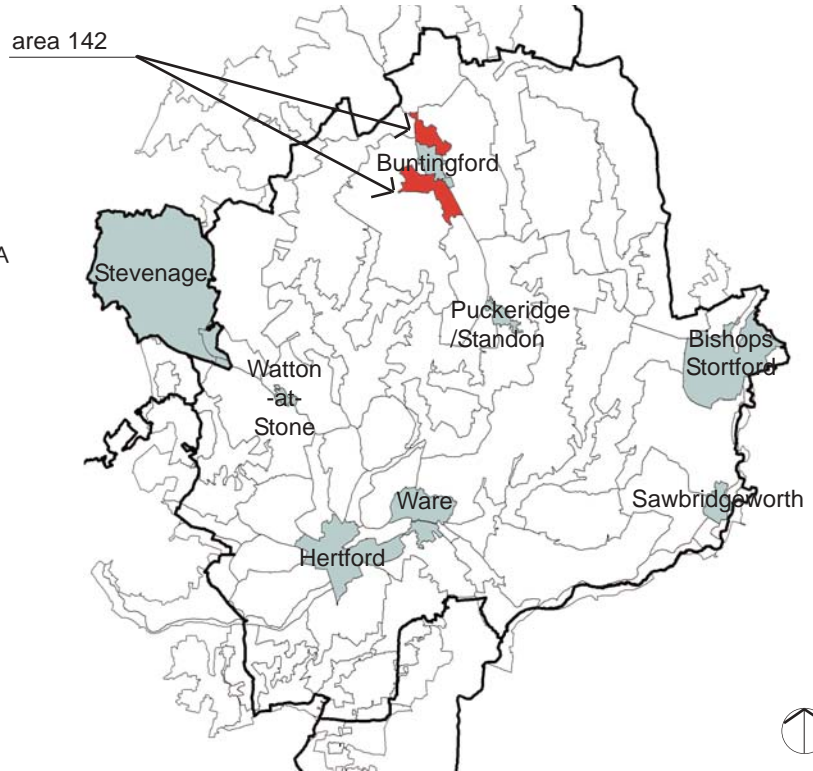


County Map showing location of LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREA

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LOCATION

Upper stretches of the River Rib between Westmill in the south and Chipping in the north.

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

The area represents the last section of the River Rib that retains a distinctive valley form and associated land uses. Further north and out of the area the river climbs onto the high plateau and has more the character of a local stream. The area is effectively divided into two sub areas by Buntingford which initially developed along the Ermine Street corridor, but in the 20th century has spread up the valley sides. The Rib is marked by a combination of pasture and riparian trees, however arable fields are found both close to the valley bottom and on the slopes. The villages of Aspenden and Westmill are historically coherent and contain a number of fine traditional buildings and groupings. There are areas of parkland supporting traditional grazing e.g. Corney Bury. The A10 corridor is a

strong feature of the area and the traffic is locally intrusive as are some of the built features within Buntingford.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- relatively narrow valley feature
- mixed land use including arable and pasture
- small to medium scale landscape in contrast to open arable areas to the adjacent plateaux
- historic villages to valley edge at Westmill and Aspenden
- parkland at Corney Bury
- sub-divided by Buntingford
- willow and poplar tree lined watercourse
- urban influence of Buntingford locally intrusive
- A10 corridor and associated traffic
- limited rights of way

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

- ruined St Bartholomew's Church- Buntingford on plateau edge
- Sainsbury's distribution depot
- Westmill village centre



- Westmill (HCC Landscape Unit)

PHYSICAL INFLUENCES

Geology and soils. The geology of the river valley comprises chalky till, which overlies most of the dip slope of the escarpment including the upper valleys. The underlying chalk is exposed in places, notably above Corney Bury Park. The soils are dominated by neutral/calcareous boulder clay soils which are deep and well drained with a mix of fine and coarse loamy soils and some calcareous sub soils, (Melford Association). There are some mixed fluvo-glacial gravels and alluvium which occupy the Rib Valley floor.

Topography. The valley forms the upper reaches of the Rib as it flows off the dip slope of the chalk escarpment. The valley is more defined to the south but becomes less pronounced to the north where it merges with the upper plateau landform.

Degree of slope. Along the valley floor the slope is typically less than 1 in 250. The side slopes range from 1 in 20 to 1 in 10.

Altitude range. Along the valley floor the levels drop from 100m near Chipping to 80m above Westmill. Across the valley the side slopes are typically 10-20m above the valley floor.

Hydrology. The valley contains the upper reaches of the River Rib which is a relatively small feature in itself. However the line of the river is marked in part by poplars, willows and some pasture at Corney Bury. There is a ford within Buntingford. The river is fed by a number of secondary ditches and streams including Aspenden Brook. The River Rib is affected by arable run-off, but Aspenden Brook is less eutrophic, feeding The Bourne downstream to Westmill. The only substantial standing water is Westminster Pond at Aspenden.

Land cover and land use. Land cover includes arable to the valley slopes and floor and pasture associated with the settlements of Westmill, Aspenden and the parkland at Corney Bury. To the fringes of Buntingford the land use is more fragmented and smaller in scale. There are limited areas of scrub, mainly around Buntingford.

Vegetation and wildlife. The area has limited semi-natural habitat. Old secondary woodland and wooded hedges are important at Aspenden. Extensive old grasslands at Corney Bury and Westmill have unfortunately been improved. St Bartholomew's Churchyard is of local importance, and the developing verges of the A10 bypass at Buntingford are becoming more important. The River Rib, with its marginal stands of trees, is only of local value in the Westmill area. Westminster Pond is too heavily shaded to be of any special value.

Old hedge banks by Corney Bury Park are recorded as a site for the nationally scarce mollusc *Ena montana*. The uncommon arable weed Shepherd's Needle is a feature of fields near St Bartholomew's Church. There are a number of fine mature trees within the villages and the parklands of Corney Bury and Aspenden.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

This valley area is dominated by the urban settlement of Buntingford, which lies at the intersection of five medieval parishes and the junction of two significant roads, the

Roman road Ermine Street (the A10) and Hare Street, at the point at which the Roman road forded the River Rib. Buntingford itself probably grew as a settlement from the 13th century, superseding an earlier now deserted settlement at Layston on the plateau edge, close to St Bartholomew's Church, (now disused) which served the town of Buntingford until 1901. Within Buntingford the Almshouses are reputedly the work of the 17th century chemist Robert Hooke.

While there is some evidence for human activity in the High Rib Valley from the Neolithic period, the current settlement pattern reflects the medieval and post-medieval development of the area. Settlements existed at Layston (now deserted), Aspenden and Westmill before 1066, and manorial sites at Corney Bury, Aspenden Hall, Westmill and Layston.

Field Patterns. The area is exceptional for its well-preserved field systems and parklands. There are a few small blocks of pre-18th century common arable and meadow pasture, now superseded by 19th century enclosure, and later 20th century prairie fields, particularly around the bypass. However the greater part of the area comprises the post-medieval or earlier informal parklands surrounding Corney Bury and Aspenden Hall, and the significant block of small, irregular fields, formed by pre-18th century enclosure, that lies north of Westmill.

Transport pattern. The historic Roman Road, Ermine Street, now the A10, passes north-south through the area. Buntingford grew up along the original linear alignment developing as a typical coaching town. The route south of the town is unchanged, but the A10 now bypasses the town to the west before rejoining the original alignment near Chipping to the north. Remaining roads are more minor and sinuous in character linking the smaller settlements of Aspenden, Westmill and around the fringes of Buntingford. Some of the lanes are sunken on the slopes. The eastern bank of the A10, south of Buntingford is retained by rows of visually inappropriate concrete slabs.

Settlements and built form. Aspenden and Westmill are attractive traditional settlements with focal parish churches. and a large number of vernacular buildings, using a mix of thatch, pargeting, brick and clay tiles together with some relatively sympathetic modern infill. Aspenden nestles in a tributary valley to the Rib and is largely contained by mature trees and hedges. Aspenden Brook runs through the village and a number of properties are accessed by bridges across the stream. Westmill is located within the main valley west of the flood meadows. The village features an attractive tree lined village core, elegant Georgian houses and a diminutive green complete with well-pump. North of Buntingford Corney Bury is red bricked 'E' shaped house with mullion and transom windows. The historic core of Buntingford lies along the old A10 with a number of Georgian and Victorian houses. Modern estates have developed to the fringes of the town.

OTHER SOURCES OF AREA-SPECIFIC INFORMATION

Pevsner, N., rev. Cherry, B., Hertfordshire, Penguin (2000)

VISUAL AND SENSORY PERCEPTION

The valley landscape is locally visible from outside the area from the adjacent plateaux edges. Within the area there is a small to medium scale with contained views and a coherent though at times diverse character. Riverside vegetation and the presence of livestock grazing helps to highlight the line of the watercourses and meadows. The A10 follows and cuts through the area and brings visual and audible distraction. North of Buntingford the diverted A10 means that Corney Bury has benefited. The upper slopes accessed off The Causeway towards St Bartholomew's provide some attractive views to the west over the town of Buntingford.

Rarity and distinctiveness. The valley landscape is fairly unusual in the county. The villages of Westmill and Aspenden and the riverside parkland at Corney Bury are the most distinctive features.

VISUAL IMPACT

There are a number of visual impacts on the area. These originate from the fact the river valley has also developed as a transport corridor. The most extensive visual impact comes from the adjacent residential developments, which in some cases lie adjacent and unscreened e.g. northern edge of Buntingford overlooking Corney Bury. The A10 is also locally intrusive, but contains sections in cutting. The slab detailing to the eastern verge south of the town is visually jarring. The widest reaching single impact is caused by the Sainsbury's distribution warehouses, which are major structures on the ridgeline, particularly as seen from the south.

ACCESSIBILITY

Despite the relatively attractive quality of the area and the local population, the river valley is poorly served with rights of way, with no access to Corney Bury and access to Westmill only by road from Buntingford. There are a few footpaths from and to Aspenden, but minimal equestrian access.

COMMUNITY VIEWS

Although data is incomplete this area appears to be one of the most highly valued in the district and this is not limited to the nationally-noted village of Westmill [A]

LANDSCAPE RELATED DESIGNATIONS

Areas of Archaeological Significance: at Westmill, Buntingford and Corney Bury

CONDITION

<i>Land cover change:</i>	localised
<i>Age structure of tree cover:</i>	mixed
<i>Extent of semi-natural habitat survival:</i>	linked
<i>Management of semi-natural habitat:</i>	not obvious
<i>Survival of cultural pattern:</i>	interrupted
<i>Impact of built development:</i>	high
<i>Impact of land-use change:</i>	moderate

STRENGTH OF CHARACTER

<i>Impact of landform:</i>	prominent
<i>Impact of land cover:</i>	prominent
<i>Impact of historic pattern:</i>	apparent
<i>Visibility from outside:</i>	locally visible
<i>Sense of enclosure:</i>	contained
<i>Visual unity:</i>	coherent
<i>Distinctiveness/rarity:</i>	unusual

CONDITION	GOOD	Strengthen and reinforce	Conserve and strengthen	Safeguard and manage
	MODERATE	Improve and reinforce	Improve and conserve	Conserve and restore
	POOR	Reconstruct	Improve and restore	Restore condition to maintain character
		WEAK	MODERATE	STRONG
STRENGTH OF CHARACTER				

STRATEGY AND GUIDELINES FOR MANAGING CHANGE: IMPROVE AND CONSERVE

- ensure new planting is encouraged to maintain age diversity in parklands and village environments of Westmill and Aspenden. Ensure landscape improvements respect the historic context of existing features and the form and character of parkland and gardens. Ornamental species should only be used to replace damaged or over-mature specimens
- restrict further ploughing of grasslands within parklands and encourage reversion from arable uses to pasture and grassland with historically accurate specimen tree planting
- survey and manage parkland and veteran trees for biodiversity value, including Aspenden, Westmill and Corney Bury
- protect the remaining river valley habitats of nature conservation interest, especially where they contribute to a suite of habitats, such as neutral grassland, running water, wet grassland, valley or floodplain woodland and grazing marsh
- resist development that could lower the water table within river valleys and affect wetland habitats
- promote a strategy for reducing the visual impact of development on the upper slopes of Buntingford including the Sainsbury's warehouses
- improve the management of old meadows and pastures e.g. at Corney Bury by ceasing fertilizer and herbicide application and introducing sensitive grassland management such as late hay cutting or low density livestock grazing
- promote the enhancement of the River Rib and its tributaries by the creation of wetland landscape features such as reedbeds, ponds and scrapes
- promote the management of existing riparian trees including pollarding. Promote additional tree planting of native water loving species, willow, alder and poplar to emphasize the line of the watercourse
- promote the creation of buffer zones between intensive arable production and important semi-natural habitats and the creation of links between semi-natural habitats
- conserve unimproved and semi-improved grassland

wherever possible, avoiding agricultural improvements to reduce their acid or calcareous nature, in order to maintain their nature conservation value

- traffic calming measures, where considered necessary, must be of a scale and design that relates to the local the landscape character of the settlement. The use of unsympathetic materials, such as concrete paviers, coloured concrete and brightly coloured road markings should be avoided and kerbing should be kept to a minimum
- maintain and develop the traditional pattern of roadside verges as a local feature and a wildlife resource. Where development is likely to affect verges and damage is unavoidable, development should include details of protection of the remaining verge and replacement of its nature conservation value within the proposed scheme. This is particularly important where verges include hedgerows, sunken lanes, ditches, hedges and hedgerow trees
- develop a strategy for the planting and management of the A10 corridor through the area that respects the historic setting but minimizes the visual context in keeping with local character
- encourage the development of an improved network of rights of way both along and across the valley giving enhanced recreational opportunities for residents

- Corney Bury Parkland (HHC Landscape Unit)

