

County map showing location of LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREA

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Hertfordshire
County Council
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LOCATION

This area is located between London Colney and St Albans in the west and Hatfield in the east. The A414 and Colney Heath mark the southern boundary and Hatfield aerodrome the northern limit.

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

A medium-scale landscape contained by adjacent urban areas and transport routes. There is a good network of hedges, field trees and tree belts to the urban areas that visually contain the largely arable character. Mineral extraction has created a number of disturbed and new landscapes that are still young. Areas of heath and semi-natural grassland are locally important at Colney Heath and Smallford gravel pits.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- medium-scale arable farmland
- subtle gently undulating landforms
- severance by transport corridors, past and present
- areas of semi-natural restored mineral workings
- heath habitat at Colney Heath
- urban development contains area physically but visually largely concealed

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

- Smallford gravel pits
- Alban Way

Colney Heath •
(J. Billingsley)



PHYSICAL INFLUENCES

Geology and soils. To the east the geology comprises Aeolian silty drift and till. The soils are deep stoneless well-drained silty soils over gravel (Hamble 2 series). The gravels were laid down in glacial lakes during the Ice Age by the 'proto-Thames'. To the west around Tyttenhanger the soils overlie a chalky till geology with calcareous subsoils in places. Soils are deep, fine, loamy and clayey, with slow permeable subsoils and slight seasonal waterlogging (Hornbeam 3 series).

Topography. This is a subtle landform. To the west there are gentle undulations. To the east the landform is a continuation of the De Havilland Plain and the land is virtually flat. The past mineral workings have produced some minor local variations in landform.

Degree of slope. Typically less than 1 in 50 to the west, but locally up to 1 in 25. Virtually flat to the east, c.1 in 500.

Altitude range. 75-86m to the west and 70 to 74 in the east.

Hydrology. The young and seasonal River Colne flows into the south of the area at Colney Heath, where it has been artificially channelled across the common since the early 20th century. There are also a number of seepage lines and spring lines in the heathy woodland. The agricultural land to the north is drained by a series of field ditches and then into Butterwick Brook and Ellenbrook, both of which flow into the Colne within Tyttenhanger Park. There are a number of waterbodies associated with the former mineral workings, e.g. at Smallford gravel pits, and elsewhere there are scattered small ponds.

Land cover and land use. The primary land use is arable farming with a pattern of treed farmland. There is a significant area of disturbed land, within which restoration has been variable in its extent and quality. Pasture is limited in extent and confined to the edge of settlements.

Vegetation and wildlife. Woodlands are discrete and comprise oak, ash and hornbeam. There are two ancient woods at Coppice Wood and Knight Wood that are a natural oak/hazel mix. Either side of the A414 is a dramatic avenue of hybrid poplars. On the north-west edge adjacent to St Albans there are a number of tree belts that conceal the extent of development behind, e.g. at the former Cell Barnes Hospital. Some mineral restoration sites have lakes and new plantation areas, often willows and poplars. Hedge species include hawthorn, elm and some holly. Field trees are mainly oaks.

- Colney Heath is an open area of common with both acidic woodland and acidic/neutral grassland communities. Species include hawthorn, gorse, bracken, foxgloves and oak, with alders lining the Colne.

- At Smallford gravel pits an interesting and valuable mosaic of semi-improved grassland, scrub, ephemeral ponds and pockets of undisturbed species-rich acidic/neutral grassland has developed on old mineral working sites that were 'poorly' restored with rubble. These areas have been grazed by gypsy horses to create an interesting 'common'. The ponds contain great crested newts, (BAP species).
- At Sleapshyde, where the pits have not been filled there is good marsh vegetation. There are also areas of naturally occurring bog communities.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

The open unenclosed heath of Colney Heath is the last remnant of the old manorial lands of Tyttenhanger, owned by the abbey until the dissolution of the monasteries. The heath lay just outside the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan Police and was the haunt of highwaymen and the location of cockfights and prize fights. The inns around the heath were all connected by a series of footpaths.

Field pattern. The field pattern is mainly pre-18th century organic enclosure which has largely been retained in areas that have not been extracted. To the north of Colney Heath there is more evidence of parliamentary enclosure. In contrast to the adjacent character areas of the Vale of St Albans and the De Havilland Plain, fields are medium in size and irregular in shape. In areas that have not been subject to mineral extraction, hedgerows are medium to tall, particularly north of the A414, which creates a sense of enclosure from the adjacent urban areas and road corridors. The extracted area north east of Colney Heath is more open in character.

Transport pattern. The historic road pattern is of narrow winding lanes within the farmed landscape. This has been largely retained, although the area is divided by the linear A414 dual carriageway. The Smallford Trail follows the line of a disused railway and is also a valuable wildlife corridor.

Settlements and built form. The traditional pattern is of dispersed settlement. There are a number of clusters, including the older settlements of Tyttenhanger, Wilkins Green, Sleapshyde and Colney Heath. These have been added to and, together with ribbon development and expansion from the adjacent urban areas, there is a sense of urban pressure. There are a number of traditional buildings, using weatherboard, render and brick alongside 20th-century materials.

VISUAL AND SENSORY PERCEPTION

Views both from outside and within the area are generally well screened by roadside vegetation along both the narrow lanes and the dual carriageways. The A414 and A1(M) provide a major source of noise and disruption.

Rarity and distinctiveness. The landscape type is frequent with the heathy habitats being the most distinct features.

VISUAL IMPACT

The extent of built development within and on the perimeter of the area is generally well concealed by vegetation. Exceptions are some of the large industrial units and glasshouses at Smallford and the A414. There is some localised fly-tipping which is visually detrimental.

ACCESSIBILITY

There is open public access to Colney Heath and a good network of footpaths and the Albans Way/Smallford Trail within the area. Public access to Smallford gravel pits is present but not well signed. There is angling at Smallford gravel pits.

COMMUNITY VIEWS

The heathland landscapes are valued for their distinctiveness amidst an otherwise unremarked-upon setting (D).

LANDSCAPE RELATED DESIGNATIONS

Watling Chase Community Forest.
LNR: Colney Heath Common.

CONDITION

<i>Land cover change:</i>	localised
<i>Age structure of tree cover:</i>	mature or young
<i>Extent of semi-natural habitat survival:</i>	fragmented
<i>Management of semi-natural habitat:</i>	good
<i>Survival of cultural pattern:</i>	interrupted
<i>Impact of built development:</i>	moderate
<i>Impact of land-use change:</i>	moderate

STRENGTH OF CHARACTER

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

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

- support the Watling Chase Community Forest in the realisation of its objectives for the area
- promote the appropriate management of ancient woodland, including Knights Wood, in order to maintain a rich ground flora and the distinction between different management systems, such as high forest, coppice and coppice-with-standards
- use ancient hedge and field boundaries to identify the most appropriate location for woodland restoration and expansion
- promote new woodland planting to maintain and improve visual separation from the adjacent urban uses and transport corridors, including A414 and A1(M). Scale of planting to typically comprise small woods, copses and shelterbelts
- encourage effective landscape management along transport corridors to ensure thinning, selective felling and replanting is undertaken to achieve a varied age structure and locally indigenous species
- reduce the visual impact of adjacent built areas, e.g. Smallford
- improve public access and signing to areas of interest including the Alban Way (Smallford Trail) and Smallford gravel pits. Provide stopping places along the Alban Way for sitting and picnicking
- encourage maintenance of the existing pattern and scale of hedgerows and field trees that provide enclosure
- promote hedgerow restoration and creation throughout the area to provide visual and ecological links between existing and proposed woodland areas. Pattern to follow historic field boundaries where possible
- encourage planting of new hedges adjacent to rights of way
- support the retention and management of heath habitats including Colney Heath. Encourage opportunities of extending this habitat
- develop appropriate management strategies to maintain and improve the mosaic of wildlife habitats areas including wetland and semi-improved grassland, in association with former mineral extraction sites. Include the continued use of grazing and management by wildlife organisations
- promote the creation of valuable new nature conservation sites, the restoration of degraded sites associated with mineral extraction and addressing areas of fly-tipping
- promote the creation of buffer zones between intensive arable production and important semi-natural habitats and the creation of links between semi-natural habitats
- promote crop diversification and the restoration of mixed livestock/arable farming where possible
- encourage the restoration of ditches and discourage the enclosure of existing open drainage systems
- provide new uncropped or grass field margins to link areas of wildlife importance and/or existing and proposed rights of way
- promote both the creation of new ponds and the retention/enhancement of existing ponds for wildlife
- where ancient lanes and their associated hedgerows fall within or abut a proposed development ensure that developers retain, protect, enhance and integrate such features into the new development with due regard to their historic, ecological and landscape value
- where hedgerow removal is deemed to be unavoidable, replacement planting should use locally native species of local provenance to maintain local distinctiveness



- From Tyttenhanger towards St Albans (J. Billingsley)