

#### LOCATION

This area lies between Harpenden in the west, Welwyn in the east and is north of the valley of the River Lea.

#### LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

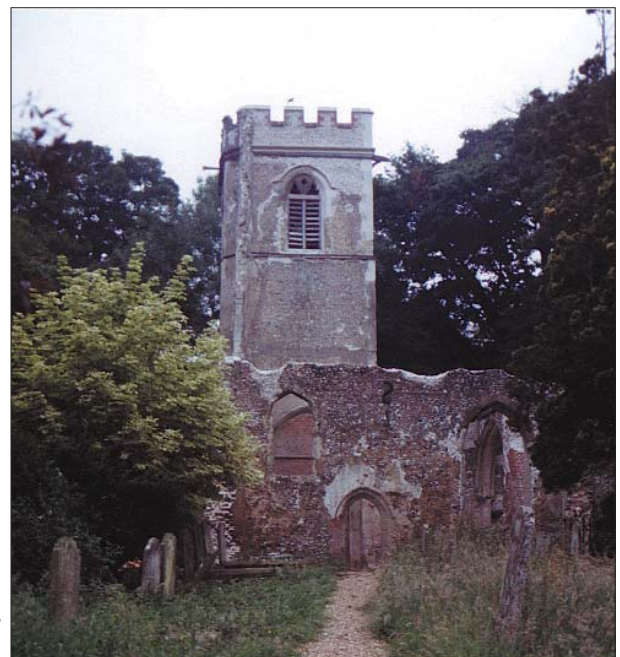
An elevated plateau area with extensive arable fields. Despite recent landscape change there is a strong sense of continuity closer to the settlements and around some of the notable historic houses and parklands. The area has a tranquil and remote feel with good opportunities for informal recreation.

#### KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- elevated plateau area dominated by large arable fields
- smaller pastoral fields closer to villages
- linear and discrete woodlands, many ancient, scattered through area
- villages with strong vernacular architecture
- remote quiet area with few detracting features
- historic houses and modest areas of parkland
- areas of regenerated common

#### DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

- Ayot St Lawrence ruined church
- Mackerye End and gardens
- Shaws Corner (National Trust)
- junipers on Gustard Wood Common golf course



Ayot St Lawrence ruined church •  
(J. Billingsley)

### PHYSICAL INFLUENCES

**Geology and soils.** Soils are fine silty over clayey and fine loamy over clayey soils with slowly permeable subsoils and slight seasonal waterlogging (Batcombe series). There are also some well-drained clayey soils over chalk and variable amounts of flint. The underlying geology is plateau drift and clay-with-flints. Locally, pockets of chalk have been recorded, e.g. at Priors Wood.

**Topography.** The plateau area extends for a distance of 6km from east to west with a series of secondary spurs pushing to the north and south. The plateau is almost flat.

**Degree of slope.** Minimal, typically less than 1 in 250 across the plateau.

**Altitude range.** 120-130m.

**Hydrology.** There are no significant streams. There are, however, a number of small ponds associated with the farms, houses or common areas.

**Land cover and land use.** The dominant land use is arable farming. Closer to the settlements there are smaller areas of pasture, mainly for horses, but also for sheep and goats. Woodlands are scattered, with concentrations around the settlements. Parkland is a more local feature of the land cover, e.g. Ayot Park and Lamer Park.

**Vegetation and wildlife.** Woodlands are scattered and discrete and include both ancient woods, e.g. Priors Wood, Hall Wood and Marshall Wood, plantations and areas of regenerated common, e.g. Bower Heath. The main woodland type is oak/hornbeam, with some beech where the chalk is closer to the surface. Understorey species are mainly holly and hawthorn. On some of the ancient woodland boundaries enormous multi-stemmed beech pollards create imposing character trees. Within the woods there are natural colonies of native daffodils.

Hedgerows are variable in condition and often gappy and occasionally infilled by fencing. Where present, hedges are medium in height and mixed in composition, including elm, hornbeam, field maple, ash, privet and holly. A particular feature of note is the number of holly standards that have been allowed to grow out. Also of particular note is Gustard Wood Common, an isolated unenclosed common currently managed by Mid Herts Golf Club. The acidic glacial gravel soils support acid grassland and a wide range of species, most notably juniper, including specimens over 6m tall.

### HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

Ayot St Lawrence dates from the late Saxon period. The most famous resident of the village was the playwright George Bernard Shaw, who lived at The New Rectory, now Shaw's Corner, for almost 50 years. From the small garden house overlooking the landscape he wrote many of his later works, including *Pygmalion* and *St Joan*. The property is now open to the public through the National Trust and each July a series of short plays are put on by the Shaw Society.

**Field pattern.** The historic agricultural landscape pattern consists of pre-18th century organic enclosure. This pattern is partly retained to the south, although field amalgamation has taken place in recent decades, particularly in the arable areas to the north. Field sizes are typically large and irregular in shape. Commons have either regenerated to secondary woodland or been used for recreation, e.g. Gustard Common.

**Transport pattern.** In the network of minor roads and lanes some are straight, e.g. The Slype, while the majority are narrow and winding.

**Settlements and built form.** This area has a dispersed and settled character with a number of mature country houses and farmhouses in traditional vernacular materials, including brick and timber frame.

- Ayot St Lawrence is a delightfully cohesive village with considerable variety in architectural styles, including timber frame, Tudor and diamond-paned windows. The largest house is Ayot House, a Queen Anne red brick building with a late-18th century parkland. A key feature of the park is New St Lawrence church, designed by Nicholas Revitt in 1778-89 in flamboyant neo-Classical style to face the west elevation of the house. The original parish church still stands as a picturesque ruin in the village, its complete demolition by Lionel Lyde having been halted by the Bishop of Lincoln.
- Mackerye End is a house of distinction, dating back to Tudor times. Its cupola bell tower is a local landmark. The essayist Charles Lamb described a nostalgic visit to the house that was one of his childhood haunts.

### OTHER SOURCES OF AREA-SPECIFIC INFORMATION

English Heritage *Register of Historic Parks and Gardens*.

## VISUAL AND SENSORY PERCEPTION

This area is only locally visible from surrounding areas due to the level and elevated landform. It is a generally coherent landscape with some areas unified and contained while others are downgraded by the impact of extensive arabilisation and with open and exposed views over the area. The area is particularly peaceful, a feature that drew George Bernard Shaw to the area.

**Rarity and distinctiveness.** This landscape type is frequent in the county. The most distinctive elements are the historic village of Ayot St Lawrence and Gustard Wood Common.

## VISUAL IMPACT

There are very few built detracting features and a number of fine local buildings of note. The 20th-century Blackmore End is the largest settlement in the area but is visually well screened by perimeter tree belts.

## ACCESSIBILITY

There is a good network of local footpaths and bridleways to the south of the area. The quiet lanes also provide good opportunities for cycling and horse riding. Shaw's Corner is a popular destination in the summer.

## COMMUNITY VIEWS

This area contains landscapes that are very highly regarded for their distinctiveness and historical and literary associations, including the woods, fields, commons and villages at Ayot St Lawrence, Gustard Wood and Mackerye End/Marshalls Heath (B).

## LANDSCAPE RELATED DESIGNATIONS

English Heritage Grade II listed: Ayot Park.

### CONDITION

|   |                    |
|---|--------------------|
| <i>Land cover change:</i>                       | <b>widespread</b>  |
| <i>Age structure of tree cover:</i>             | <b>mature</b>      |
| <i>Extent of semi-natural habitat survival:</i> | <b>fragmented</b>  |
| <i>Management of semi-natural habitat:</i>      | <b>good</b>        |
| <i>Survival of cultural pattern:</i>            | <b>interrupted</b> |
| <i>Impact of built development:</i>             | <b>low</b>         |
| <i>Impact of land-use change:</i>               | <b>high</b>        |

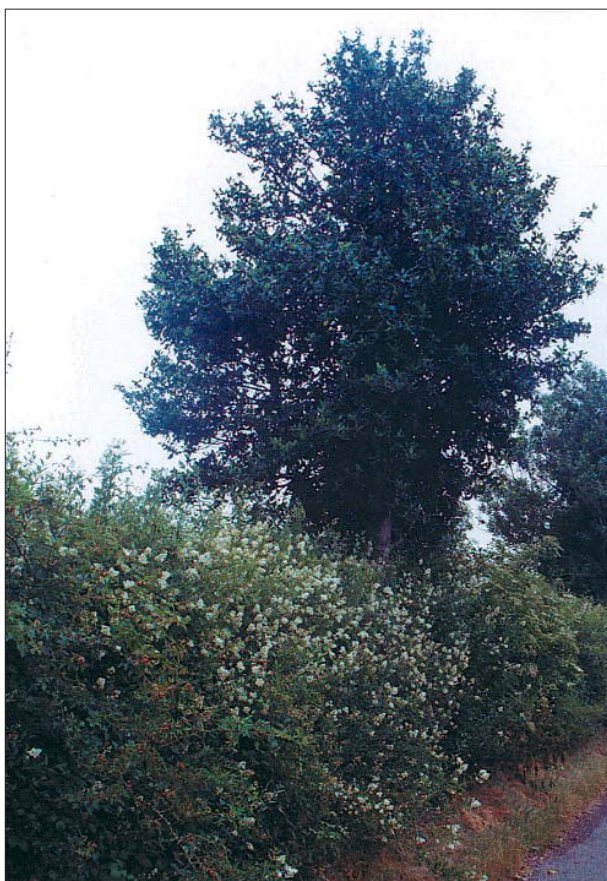
### STRENGTH OF CHARACTER

|                                    |                        |
|------------------------------------|------------------------|
| <i>Impact of landform:</i>         | <b>apparent</b>        |
| <i>Impact of land cover:</i>       | <b>prominent</b>       |
| <i>Impact of historic pattern:</i> | <b>interrupted</b>     |
| <i>Visibility from outside:</i>    | <b>locally visible</b> |
| <i>Sense of enclosure:</i>         | <b>partial</b>         |
| <i>Visual unity:</i>               | <b>coherent</b>        |
| <i>Distinctiveness/rarity:</i>     | <b>frequent</b>        |

| CONDITION | GOOD     | Strengthen and reinforce | Conserve and strengthen     | Safeguard and manage                    |
|-----------|----------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|---|
|           | MODERATE | Improve and reinforce    | <b>Improve and conserve</b> | 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**

- extend the network of woodlands across the plateau.  
Promote the expansion of woodland beyond ancient woodland boundaries, especially where this will help in creating habitat links across arable areas
- maintain and extend the rights of way across the area
- promote the appropriate management of woodland in order to maintain a rich ground flora and the distinction between different management systems, such as high forest and coppice-with-standards
- 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 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 and/or rights of way and to include additional hedgerow trees
- maintain the local pattern of hedgerows and species, including the presence of holly standards
- promote crop diversification and the restoration of mixed livestock/arable farming where possible
- support the continued management of Gustard Wood Common as both a golf course and an important acidic grassland
- promote the management of areas of acidic heath that have reverted to secondary woodland, e.g. Bower Heath. Maintain a balance between wildlife and public access and promote local initiatives for traditional management
- support the preparation of a restoration and management plans for the parkland landscapes including Ayot Park and Mackerye End, ensuring that schemes fully address landscape, historic and ecological issues. Ensure new planting is encouraged to maintain age diversity
- promote both the creation of new ponds and the retention/enhancement of existing ponds for wildlife
- promote the use of traditional hedged field enclosure for pasture in place of timber or wire fencing
- protect the traditional pattern of local lanes and the associated features, including hedgebanks, sunken lanes, verges and hedges
- maintain the tranquil qualities of the area while allowing access for visitors to focal points like Ayot St. Lawrence. Protect the area from further active recreational facilities and built development



• Holly standards on The Slype  
(J. Billingsley)