

County map showing location of LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREA

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Hertfordshire  
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LA076678



**LOCATION**

This area lies north west of Welwyn Garden City, south of the River Mimram and south west of Welwyn.

**LANDSCAPE CHARACTER**

A modest plateau area and series of secondary valleys, with a high proportion of woodland enclosing historic villages and parklands. Arable cropping predominates between the woodlands and particularly as the slopes run down towards the Mimram valley in the north. There is a strong sense of historic continuity close to the settlements, woodlands and around historic houses and parklands. The area is disturbed physically and audibly by the A1(M).

**KEY CHARACTERISTICS**

- elevated plateau area
- extensive woodlands and plantations
- arable fields predominate between woodlands and to the north
- small to medium pockets of pastoral fields close to and within villages
- villages with strong vernacular architecture
- historic houses and areas of wooded parkland, e.g. Sherrardspark

**DISTINCTIVE FEATURES**

- Ayot Green village green with fine veteran oaks
- St Peters church.
- Ayot Greenway - former railway line, now footpath
- Ayot Mountfitchet gatehouse and pedestrian access



Ayot Green •  
(J. Billingsley)

**PHYSICAL INFLUENCES**

**Geology and soils.** On the upstanding areas the soils are deep fine loamy over clayey and clayey with slowly permeable subsoils (Hornbeam 3 series). These overlie a chalky till. Calcareous subsoils exist in places, with some chalk pits. Locally at Sherrardspark Wood there is a mixture of soils including chalk and some acidic gravels.

**Topography.** The organic plateau area is approximately 3km east/west, and 1km north/south. The plateau undulates very gently, with a number of secondary valleys cutting into the plateau on the side slopes. The northern slopes to the Mimram are more pronounced.

**Degree of slope.** Less than 1 in 100 on the plateau. The side slopes are typically 1 in 10 but can be as steep as 1 in 6 in the secondary valleys.

**Altitude range.** Plateau areas range between 119-128m; slopes down to 70m at the Mimram.

**Hydrology.** There are a significant number of small ponds associated with the farms, houses or along the lanes, e.g. White Hill. A number of springs rise on the northern slopes, giving names to small woods such as Linces Spring and Sanders Spring. There are a number of swallowholes in Sherrardspark Wood which are fed by woodland streams. A reservoir is also located in Sherrardspark Wood.

**Land cover and land use.** The dominant land use is arable farming. Closer to the settlements there are small areas of equestrian pasture. Woodlands are extensive. Open but private parkland areas exist around Ayot Montfitchet and Ayot Bury. Other parklands tend to be either heavily wooded, e.g. Sherrardspark Wood, or partly arable with isolated clumps of trees in the fields.

**Vegetation and wildlife.** The main woodland mix is oak/hornbeam. Other species include ash, beech, lime and sycamore with an understorey of holly and hawthorn. Woodlands include a mix of ancient woods, e.g. Saul's Wood, Threegroves Wood and Rectory Wood, with others of later plantation origin. Dodswell Wood and Sherrardspark Wood contain strong patterns of radiating rides which are important habitats for invertebrates. At Dodswells conifer stands are present along with a mixed ground flora including bluebells and rock rose on the thin gravel soils over the underlying chalk.

- Sherrardspark Wood (SSSI and LNR) is located on the acidic gravel and sand Reading Beds, which support an extensive semi-natural sessile oak/hornbeam woodland. A large part of the woodland is dominated by mature stands of sessile oak high forest, which is a rare habitat in lowland England. Other species include downy birch, hairy birch, ash, cherry and field maple. The shrub layer is dominated by honeysuckle and holly. The underlying chalk comes to the surface in some locations, e.g. along the line of the disused railway, and here calcareous plant communities are supported, including spindle, dogwood and species of helleborine.

- Hedgerows are present along roads, yet seldom as field boundaries. They are medium in height and of mixed species, including elm, hawthorn, hazel, hornbeam and field maple, with some holly standards and boundary oaks. There are also a number of poplars within the villages.
- An area of particular note is Ayot Green which has some magnificent veteran oak trees and chestnuts.

**HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES**

**Field pattern.** The historic agricultural landscape pattern comprised informal parkland, pre-18th century organic enclosure and parliamentary enclosure from the 18th century. This pattern is partially retained, but field amalgamation has taken place in recent decades, particularly in the arable areas to the north. Field sizes are medium on the plateau and larger on the northern slopes. There has been a shift from pasture to larger arable fields around the villages.

**Transport pattern.** The local pattern of winding minor lanes, some with hedgebanks, adds to the ancient feel of the landscape, e.g. Waterend Lane. The area is interrupted by the A1(M) corridor, which passes through in a substantial cutting.

**Settlements and built form.** There is a dispersed and settled character with small clusters of cottages and a few mature country houses and farmhouses in traditional vernacular materials, including brick and timber frame. The village of Ayot Green comprises a number of former estate workers' cottages set around a shady green. To the north east is Welwyn village.

- Houses include Ayot Bury (dating from 1672) and Ayot Place (1615), now 'Ayot Montfitchet'. The latter is a timber-framed farmhouse that includes a minstrels' gallery.
- Ayot St Peter's church is a distinctive gothic Victorian church (1874-75) in bold mixed brick patterns with a striking blue clock face.
- Sherrardspark Wood contains Digswell Place.

**OTHER SOURCES OF AREA-SPECIFIC INFORMATION**

English Nature: SSSI notification.

**VISUAL AND SENSORY PERCEPTION**

The wooded skyline is widely visible from surrounding areas but the plateau areas themselves are relatively hidden. The village landscapes are contained, due to the level and elevated landform, while the northern slopes are open and visible from the Mimram valley. This is a locally coherent landscape but is often interrupted by large arable fields and the relentless drone of the A1(M).

**Rarity and distinctiveness.** This landscape type is relatively frequent. The woodland at Sherrardspark is the most distinctive element.

**VISUAL IMPACT**

The urban edge of Welwyn is prominent to the north east. East of the A1(M) the woodland is contained by the residential development of Welwyn Garden City along the majority of its perimeter. The A1(M) is mainly in cutting but locally visible.

**ACCESSIBILITY**

There is an extensive network of local footpaths, particularly in Sherrardspark Wood where there is also an access land agreement. The local lanes also provide good opportunities for cycling and horse riding as does the Ayot Greenway, which follows the line of the old railway. There is a unique pedestrian access through the gatehouse at Ayot Montfitchet.

**COMMUNITY VIEWS**

This area contains landscapes with significant value for their distinctiveness, including Ayot Green (C).

**LANDSCAPE RELATED DESIGNATIONS**

Landscape Conservation Area (majority).  
SSSI: Sherrardspark Wood.

<b>CONDITION</b>	
<i>Land cover change:</i>	<b>localised</b>
<i>Age structure of tree cover:</i>	<b>mature or young</b>
<i>Extent of semi-natural habitat survival:</i>	<b>widespread</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>moderate</b>

<b>STRENGTH OF CHARACTER</b>	
<i>Impact of landform:</i>	<b>prominent</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>contained</b>
<i>Visual unity:</i>	<b>coherent</b>
<i>Distinctiveness/rarity:</i>	<b>frequent</b>

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

**STRATEGY AND GUIDELINES FOR MANAGING****CHANGE: CONSERVE AND RESTORE**

- create new woodlands to the north east to soften the visual impact of Welwyn
- within existing woodlands encourage the replacement of softwoods with indigenous native deciduous communities
- maintain and extend public access arrangements to woodlands and throughout the area. Support the maintenance of the Ayot Greenway and safe access routes through Sherrardspark Wood
- 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, coppice, coppice-with-standards and wood pasture
- maintain glades and rides for both calcareous and acidic plant communities and associated wildlife
- promote the expansion of woodland beyond ancient woodland boundaries, especially where this will help in creating habitat links across arable areas
- support the survey and management of veteran trees throughout the area, including those on Ayot Green
- 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
- promote crop diversification and the restoration of mixed livestock/arable farming where possible
- 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, hedgebanks, verges and hedges as a local feature and wildlife resource
- maintain the rural qualities of the area and protect it from active recreation and development
- promote a strategy for the maintenance and improvement of the woodland cover along the A1(M). Seek to provide measures to reduce noise intrusion into the area from the road



• Sherrardspark Wood  
(HCC Landscape Unit)