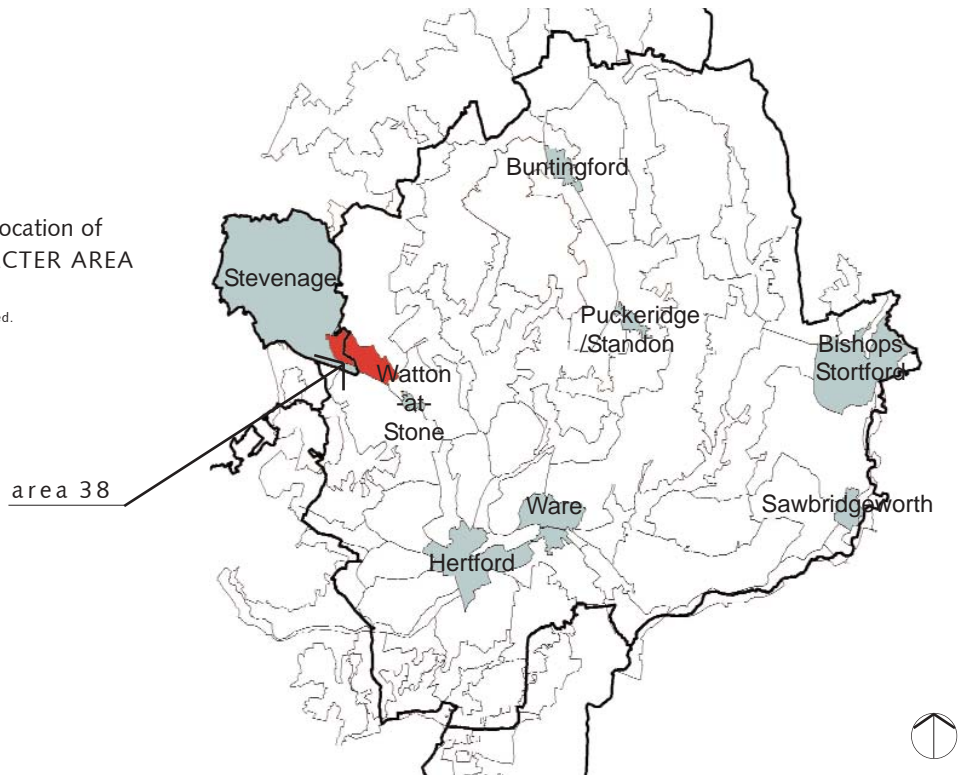


County map showing location of LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREA

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LOCATION

East of Stevenage and north of the railway line, including Stevenage Brook.

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

South-facing undulating parkland dominated by two estates - Astonbury and Frogmore - exhibiting planned and unified characteristics of estate farmland. Rural, seemingly remote and ancient, despite proximity to Stevenage.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- uniformity of field and road boundaries created by estate management, with young hedgerow trees, well-maintained hedges and narrow verges
- undulating estate farmland, primarily pastoral, with extensive golf course on western boundary
- well wooded and hedged
- ornamental tree species within parkland

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

- both Astonbury House and Frogmore Hall are notable buildings with associated buildings (farm diversification, Field Centre)
- watercourses
- golf course
- gravel workings completely screened from view from public roads
- consistent presence of young ash trees in hedgerows



Astonbury • (P. Shears)

PHYSICAL INFLUENCES

Geology and soils. Slowly permeable calcareous clay soils over chalky till (glacial drift) (Hanslope series) with a small gravel plateau and chalk quite close to the surface.

Topography. Gently undulating minor ridge, sloping southwards to Stevenage Brook and eastwards to the middle reaches of the river Beane.

Degree of slope. Variable: 1 in 45 to 1 in 12.5.

Altitude range. 60m to 75m (91m locally).

Hydrology. Stevenage Brook is the main tributary of the Beane and its flow helps to maintain fish species, although it is polluted. Within the grounds of Frogmore Hall the Beane is interrupted by a weir and waterfall.

Land cover and land use. Both estates are predominantly in pastoral cultivation, with parkland trees and significant blocks of deciduous woodland. In the western part of the area there is a large golf course. In the southern part of this area there are, or have been, mineral extraction works, but these are completely screened from public view by surrounding vegetation and are now managed as a wildlife site.

Vegetation and wildlife. Most of this area is grassland of variable quality - in pastoral cultivation or in use as a golf course. The woodlands are also variable, mainly deciduous, with pines and limes mixed with oak, ash and holly. Astonbury has oak/hornbeam woodland and neutral grassland with notable mature hornbeam in the parkland. Astonbury Wood is a nature reserve as well as being part of the field study centre. Field boundaries are generally hedged, with some degradation at the arable edges, and consist of holly, elder and hazel, with ash and oak as hedgerow trees. Significant lengths of hedge around Astonbury Wood have been re-laid. Young plantings of hedgerow ash are a notable feature around Frogmore, as are the gravel complexes, previously worked and now supporting a rich flora around a chalk/marl lake. Despite its pollution, there are reasonable wildlife margins along Stevenage Brook.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

This area is characterised by the presence of two estates with mansions. The earliest record of the deer park at Frogmore is 1676, while Astonbury developed from an 11th-century bury or manor which was given to Bishop Odo of Bayeux, brother of William the Conqueror and has been continuously occupied at or near the existing buildings ever since. Many trees were planted when the grounds were rescued from near dereliction c.1910.

Field pattern. Sub-regular pattern of medium to large fields in arable cultivation, plus extensive parkland. The historic field pattern both within and around the parklands of Astonbury and Frogmore appears to be somewhat disturbed, interrupted by mineral extraction and a golf course.

Transport pattern. The road network is pre-20th century, following the boundaries of the estate landholdings. The few lanes within the area are narrow and winding, generally with narrow verges, occasionally marked by young plantings of ash trees in the hedgerow. The southern boundary of this area is the A602 from Hertford to Stevenage, paralleled by the railway. Both are in a slight valley and do not intrude visually, although they do produce noise.

Settlements and built form. There are no settlements within the area, rather two large country houses with associated farm buildings and dwellings and small blocks of single-storey 20th-century linear development along some of the lanes. This is tending to bring a more settled character to the area, possibly influenced by its proximity to Stevenage.

Frogmore Hall is a red brick neo-Gothic mansion with a large square tower. Astonbury House is a three-storeyed Jacobean mansion, dating in part from c.1540. It was converted to multiple residential units in the 1980s.

OTHER SOURCES OF AREA-SPECIFIC INFORMATION

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

VISUAL AND SENSORY PERCEPTION

This area is locally visible from the higher ground to the north. Within the area extensive views are available, especially from higher ground. The scale of landscape elements is medium to large, while the area is visually coherent and apparently open, because the woodland blocks are not linked and are not of such scale as to dominate the area, which is quiet, but with constant low road traffic noise.

Rarity and distinctiveness. Unusual, especially so close to a large urban centre. Compact and remote.

VISUAL IMPACT

The visual impact of the railway and A602 to the south is insignificant and localised (but note noise impact above). Locally there is some change from pastoral to arable cultivation, but this is of limited impact and is chiefly demonstrated by a local degradation of hedges.

ACCESSIBILITY

Noted recreational land uses: golf course to west
Frequency/density of footpaths, bridleways - both widespread. Astonbury Wood is open to the public on a permit system, or more generally on Bluebell Sunday each April.

COMMUNITY VIEWS

Insufficient data available from the community exercise to provide a rating. (C) estimated.

LANDSCAPE RELATED DESIGNATIONS

Landscape Conservation Area.

CONDITION

<i>Land cover change:</i>	localised
<i>Age structure of tree cover:</i>	mixed
<i>Extent of semi-natural habitat survival:</i>	widespread
<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

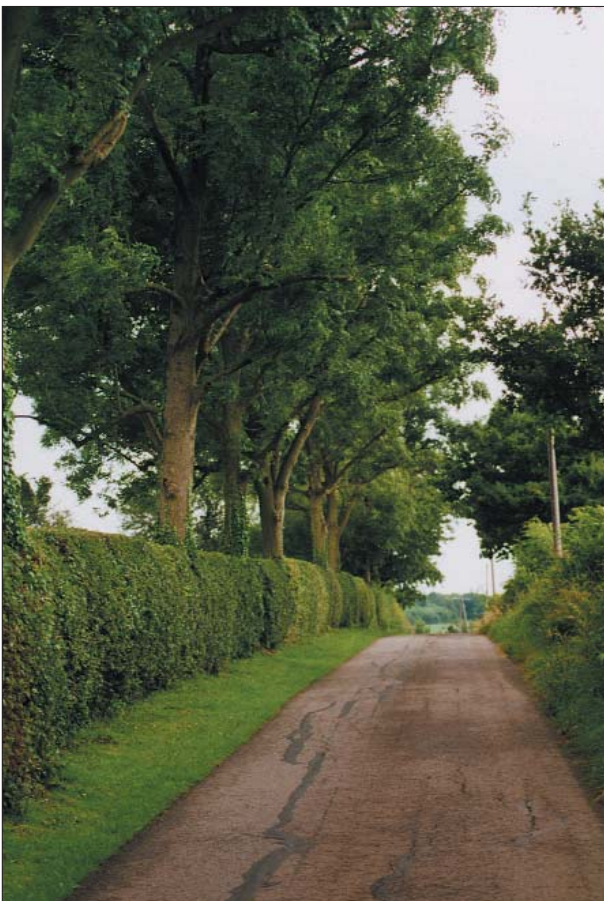
STRENGTH OF CHARACTER

<i>Impact of landform:</i>	apparent
<i>Impact of land cover:</i>	prominent
<i>Impact of historic pattern:</i>	interrupted/strong
<i>Visibility from outside:</i>	local
<i>Sense of enclosure:</i>	contained
<i>Visual unity:</i>	unified
<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: CONSERVE AND RESTORE**

- promote the maintenance of grazing as a management technique in parklands
- encourage the reversion of arable to pasture where appropriate
- ensure that landowners are aware of the conservation value of veteran trees and dead wood
- promote the use of locally native species for hedgerow planting along road frontages, in preference to fencing or walls
- encourage the restoration of former mineral workings to maximise their nature conservation potential and complement local landscape character, especially where restoration to previous landform is not possible
- encourage the planting of new parkland trees to ensure that a mixed-age stock of parkland trees is maintained
- within golf courses, encourage the retention of the local landform, existing mature and semi-mature trees, the planting of native trees in preference to ornamentals, especially around the perimeter of the course, and the management of roughs, etc., to maximise their nature conservation potential. Where golf courses are proposed within historic parkland, ensure that adequate buffer zones are maintained around historic built features, to protect their integrity.
- assist landowners to conserve the historic continuity of the area by offering advice on historic grant aid, woodland management, veteran trees, etc.
- encourage landowners to maintain pastoral land management
- encourage landowners to restore or replace degraded hedges
- encourage the use of management techniques to encourage biodiversity within recreational areas, such as different mowing regimes, use of locally indigenous tree and shrub species, etc



- Ash in thorn hedge at Frogmore Farm (P. Shears)