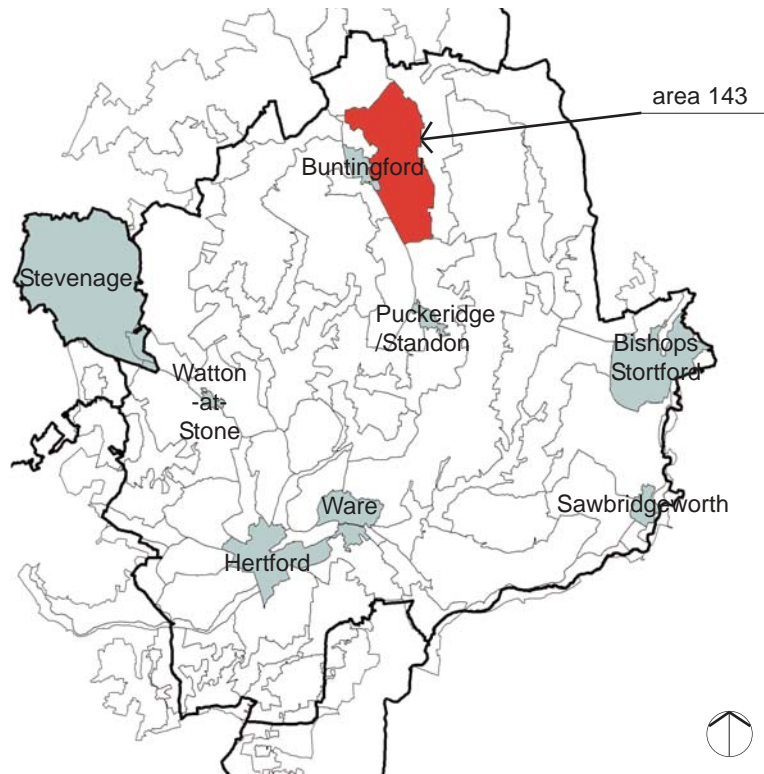


County Map showing location of LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREA

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LOCATION

The area is located on the elevated plateau between the valleys of the River Quin to the east and the River Rib to the west. It stretches from Wyddial in the north to Hay Street in the south.

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

The character area comprises an elevated arable landscape with extensive views over a gently undulating plateau. There is a moderately strong historic character to the north resulting from the winding lanes, retained field patterns and scattered woodland cover while to the south the character is more open. Settlement typically comprises isolated farms and occasional cottage groups. The most distinctive areas are located near the larger houses including Alswick and at Wyddial where the hall and core of the village retain an important focus. The major detractors are the high voltage electricity cables and pylons that dwarf local features on the plateau and the Sainsbury's warehouse

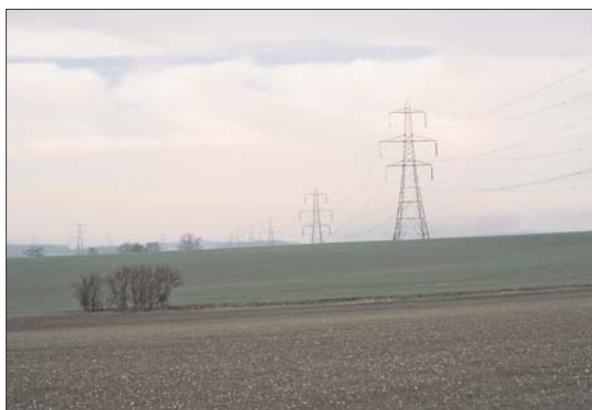
at Buntingford.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- gently undulating plateau
- predominantly arable land use
- field sizes generally medium to large with some historic continuity but locally interrupted
- isolated but distinctive country houses set in small parklands
- small to medium discrete woods
- plateau crossed by sinuous lanes from east to west

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

- Wyddial Hall and relic parkland
- Owles Hall - castellated
- Sainsbury's distribution depot
- high voltage electricity pylons
- ponds



- Power lines near Brown's Corner (J.Billingsley)

PHYSICAL INFLUENCES

Geology and soils. The geology of the area comprises chalky till boulder clay overlying the solid chalk of the escarpment dip slope with some minor superficial fluvo-glacial deposits overlying it to the south. The soils are slowly permeable and a mix of calcareous clayey and non-calcareous clayey with a slight risk of water erosion, (Hanslope association).

Topography. The plateau gently undulates from north to south. There is a more marked break of slope to the west and south where the plateau meets with the High Rib valley and a more subtle change to the east where it meets the River Quin.

Degree of slope. The main plateau falls by about 1 in 350, but there are local undulations in the plateau which may get as steep as 1 in 20. Haley Hill Ditch, east of Buntingford on the edge of the Rib Valley is locally 1 in 12.

Altitude range. The dip slope plateau slowly falls from about 131m in the north near Wyddial to 114m in the south near Hay Street.

Hydrology. There are a number of ponds on the plateau, most of which are associated with the settlements, moated houses and farmsteads to the north e.g. at Wyddial Hall. A number of streams and brooks rise on the plateau, draining the boulder clay and then flow out into the neighbouring valleys.

Land cover and land use. The prominent land use and land cover is arable farming within medium to large fields, some of which have been converted from parkland as at Wyddial. There are smaller areas of pasture associated with the villages and individual settlements. There are a few discrete woodlands, concentrated to the north of the area around Wyddial, some of which are of plantation origin.

Vegetation and wildlife. Most of the area is very open, hedge-less and intensive arable, but there are remnant semi-natural woodlands at Alswick Hall, near Stonebury, and around Wyddial itself. These tend to be rather species-poor ash/maple woodlands, with frequent field elm. None of the ponds in the area are known to be of particular importance. Grasslands are almost non-existent, except for some reasonable paddocks east of Buntingford. The old chalk pits south of Buntingford have a diverse and locally important flora, absent elsewhere in the entire region. Great Bellflower is a feature in some hedgerows to the north end of the area. Westmill chalk pit has local species such as Common Eyebright, Tall Broomrape and Rockrose. Ornamental parkland trees including cedars and chestnuts are a feature at Wyddial.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

The plateau contains parts of several parishes, including Wyddial, Buntingford, Hornead, Westmill and Braughing, and supports a network of dispersed farmsteads manor houses and occasional groups of houses, most of which are on medieval sites. There is also some evidence for settlement activity on the plateau since the later prehistoric period in the form of cropmarks, finds of Roman amphorae (east of Westmill and adjacent to the Roman road Ermine Street, the A10) and other finds.

The area is characterised by isolated farmsteads and houses, many of which stand on or adjacent to earlier manorial sites and thereby perpetuate a settlement pattern established in the medieval period. Many are moated, such as those at Moles Farm, Beauchamps and Alswick Hall, and traces of small associated settlements can be traced at Alswick Hall and Wyddial. Other sites have shifted or declined during the medieval and post-medieval periods, and are now deserted, such as Hobbs Moat at Dassels.

The current house at Wyddial Hall dates from the late 18th century. Its elegant white stucco mid-Georgian façade represents a bold feature in the landscape as seen from the east. The grounds of the house once contained bold avenues to the north east and west, but these were slowly removed as the Repton scheme commissioned by John Ellis MP was implemented. The immediate gardens near the house remain but the wider parkland has predominantly been converted to arable. A few forlorn cedars provide the only indication of the former park. In the garden of the lodge, Cave Gate is the blocked entrance to the mythical Anstey Cave, a tunnel that reputedly provided a link with Anstey Castle, 3km to the east.

Field Patterns. Fields units are typically medium to large in size, with some pockets of smaller units linked to the settlement clusters. The field systems of the area were originally a combination of unenclosed common arable fields and smaller 'irregular' enclosure fields, both established before the 18th century. A small area of these irregular fields has survived around Wyddial, and also at least part of the informal parkland of Wyddial Hall. The remainder of the area is now dominated by large 'prairie' fields that succeeded an interim stage of gradual enclosure of common arable during the 18th and 19th century. The result are some enormous fields e.g. east of Westmill. There is little pasture or woodland and it is evident that woodland cover was already slight by the later 19th century, due the long term use of the area for arable cultivation. Hedges are typically medium to low in height and contain mixed species. They are often gappy and include few hedgerow trees.

Transport pattern. The plateau is crossed by two secondary routes, the B1038 between Buntingford and Hare Street and the minor road to Wyddial, the latter of which is sinuous and marked by banks and ditches with narrow verges. There are no north south routes and any other tracks are cul de sacs to individual properties. The eastern bank of the A10, south of Buntingford is retained by rows of visually inappropriate concrete slabs.

Settlements and built form. The area is sparsely settled with a range of farmsteads, occasional cottages and houses e.g. Alswick Hall. The only village, Wyddial, includes a range of Victorian cottages, modern houses and more recent conversions. There is a small flint faced church close to the Hall. On the plateau edge east of Buntingford lies Owles house, a brick Victorian Manor with battlements.

OTHER SOURCES OF AREA-SPECIFIC INFORMATION

HCC: List of historic Parks and Gardens

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

VISUAL AND SENSORY PERCEPTION

The plateau landscape is locally visible at a distance from neighbouring plateaux. From the adjacent valleys the plateau is more concealed. The landscape coherent with a medium scale, in contrast to some of the other plateau areas in the locality. There is an open character with extensive views due to the relative elevation of the landscape and as a result it is visually sensitive to changes in built form. The area is general tranquil with distant noise from the A10 and intermittent and local noise from the B1038. Wyddial Hall is distinctive from the open landscape to the east particularly when floodlit.

Rarity and distinctiveness. The plateau landscape is fairly frequent in the county. The immediate environment of Wyddial Hall is the most distinctive feature.

VISUAL IMPACT

There are a number of visual impacts on the area particularly to towards Buntingford. Some of the residential developments on the fringe of the town are unscreened and prominent e.g. eastern edge of the town. The A10 is also locally intrusive. The Sainsbury's distribution warehouse is a major structure on the ridgeline, particularly as seen from the east on Owles Lane. Further north the twin line of high voltage power lines and masts are a widespread and prominent impact as they stride across the open countryside. Some of the recent tree species selection to the south east on the B1368 is out of context.

ACCESSIBILITY

There is a moderate network of rights of way to the north of the area. These include footpaths, bridleways and byways. Active recreational use by ramblers, cyclists and equestrians was noted during the field survey. South of Stonebury Farm the area is a more open exposed area with no rights of way.

COMMUNITY VIEWS

Although data is limited the distinctiveness of this hedgerow-less landscape is noted - although the lack of hedgerows is typically disliked [C]

"open upland fields, ditches and ash plantations" RM Healey, 'Hertfordshire: A Shell Guide', 1982

"Gently undulating contours; almost entirely arable with frequent small patches of woodland. Most pleasant walking with a good network of paths...some old hedgerows still, but many have gone. In essence - let it be!" (Respondent 0689)

LANDSCAPE RELATED DESIGNATIONS

CONDITION

| | |
|---|--------------------|
| <i>Land cover change:</i> | localised |
| <i>Age structure of tree cover:</i> | over mature |
| <i>Extent of semi-natural habitat survival:</i> | scattered |
| <i>Management of semi-natural habitat:</i> | not obvious |
| <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> | apparent |
| <i>Visibility from outside:</i> | locally visible |
| <i>Sense of enclosure:</i> | partial |
| <i>Visual unity:</i> | coherent |
| <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

- promote the appropriate management of coppice woodland in order to re-establish a rich ground flora and the distinction between different management systems, such as high forest and coppice with standards
- promote the creation of new small to medium scale native broadleaved woods throughout the area and particularly to the south, to reduce the scale of the open arable areas, using ancient hedge and field boundaries to locate the most appropriate location for wood restoration and expansion
- survey and manage parkland and veteran trees for biodiversity value at Wyddial Hall and Alswick
- restrict further ploughing of grasslands within parklands and encourage reversion from arable uses to pasture and grassland with historically accurate specimen tree planting
- promote both the creation of new ponds and the retention / enhancement for wildlife of existing ponds
- promote the creation of buffer zones between intensive arable production as important semi-natural habitats and the creation of links between semi-natural habitats. Buffers to also target rights of way where possible
- promote selected 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 where possible
- ensure that the surroundings of converted and new buildings are designed and maintained to be in keeping with their surroundings by ensuring that hard landscape and 'Garden' details are be screened from view where possible and native species are used for hedging and tree planting to the perimeter
- 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 hedgebanks, sunken lanes, ditches, hedges and hedgerow trees
- encourage the development of an improved network of rights of way to the south of the area
- consider a strategy for reducing the visual impact of the existing high voltage power cables and pylons
- promote a strategy for reducing the visual impact of development on the upper slopes of Buntingford including the Sainsbury's warehouses



• Hare Street Road towards Alswick (HCC Landscape Unit)