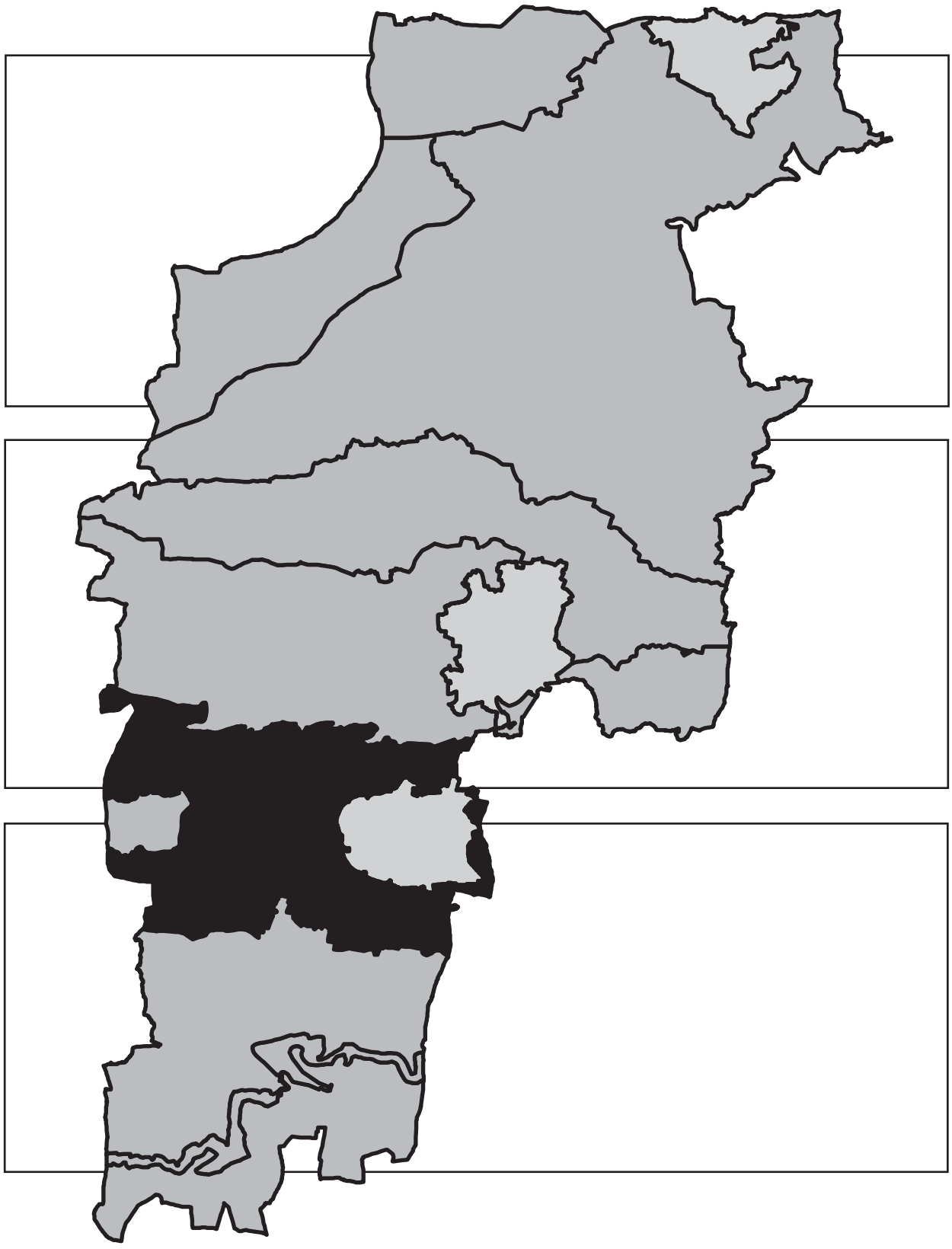


Landscape Character Area 4
Hickstead Low Weald



Hickstead Low Weald

CHARACTERISATION

Summary and key characteristics

Lowland mixed arable and pastoral landscape with a strong hedgerow pattern. It lies over low ridges and clay vales drained by the upper Adur streams. In the east, the area has experienced high levels of development centred on Burgess Hill.

- Alternating west-east trending low ridges with sandstone beds and clay vales carrying long, sinuous upper Adur streams.
- Views dominated by the steep downland scarp to the south and the High Weald fringes to the north.
- Arable and pastoral rural landscape, a mosaic of small and larger fields, scattered woodlands, shaws and hedgerows with hedgerow trees.
- Quieter and more secluded, confined rural landscape to the west, much more development to the east, centred on Burgess Hill.
- Biodiversity in woodland, meadowland, ponds and wetland.
- Mix of farmsteads and hamlets favouring ridgeline locations, strung out along lanes.
- A modest spread of designed landscapes and major landmark of Hurstpierpoint College.
- Crossed by north-south roads including the A23 Trunk Road, with a rectilinear network of narrow rural lanes.
- London to Brighton Railway Line crosses the area through Burgess Hill.
- Varied traditional rural buildings built with diverse materials including timber-framing, weatherboarding, Horsham Stone roofing and varieties of local brick and tile-hanging.
- Principal visitor attraction is the Hickstead All England Equestrian Showground.

Description and experience of the landscape

7.1 The geology of this part of the Low Weald is typical of West Sussex, comprising an homogeneous floor of gently undulating Weald Clay rarely exceeding 30-40 metres above sea level with much land under 15 metres. Bands of flaggy Horsham Stone, ironstone and small, scattered beds of *Paludina* (swamp-formed) limestones define the more prominent ridges. Other deposits in the clay include *marker clay* (beds with distinctive rock fragments or fossils which permit their identification wherever found) and sand. Parts of the valley edges are overlain by alluvium and river terrace deposits.

7.2 In typical Low Wealden fashion, this geological structure results in a broad band of alternating west-east trending low ridges (irregular direction and shape) and clay vales carrying the long, sinuous streams of the Upper Adur river system. This pattern runs from the quiet country around Wineham east to the County boundary at Burgess Hill. Two broad, parallel arms of the upper Adur Valley cross the area, branching at Twineham. The northerly branch parallels the wooded, hilly High Weald fringes. Long, winding and leisurely, it drains the shallow clay vale north of Hickstead

and Burgess Hill. Towards the County boundary, the river-stream breaks up into a series of headwater brooks, some within narrow, wooded gills, including an area of uncharacteristically dense woodland just over the County boundary in the parish of Wivelsfield. This river branch drains the large Pond Lye at Southdown View. Equally long and sinuous, the southern river branch drains the long clay vale between the Upper Greensand ridge with its expanded ridge line villages to the south. To the north a long, flattish irregular Weald Clay ridge runs from Twineham Green east to Burgess Hill.

7.3 Skyline hedgerows and trees tend to restrict long views. Views south are dominated by the steep downland scarp, with occasionally good prospects of the rising, gently dissected wooded slopes of the High Weald fringe rising to the north.

7.4 Much of the landscape has a secluded pastoral quality conferred by a mosaic of fields and woodlands, streamside trees, shaws, hedgerows and numerous mature hedgerow and field trees. This wooded effect is all the more surprising as there is a marked absence of woodland networks in general and ancient woodland in particular. Only in the aforementioned area north of Burgess Hill and straddling the County boundary is there any land where woodland cover is concentrated in a network of woodlands, copses and gill woods.

7.5 The field pattern is a mix of formal enclosures and irregular informal fields enclosed by hedgerows and shaws, pastureland more common on the heavy clays, mixed arable and pasture in a more open landscape on the lighter, sandier soils. Nevertheless, the historic landscape has been greatly altered in places (for instance, around Burgess Hill) by modern field amalgamation and hedgerow removal, imparting much local variability in the landscape.

7.6 As with the scarp footslopes to the south, the area is crossed south to north by various roads and the busy London to Brighton Railway Line between Hassocks and Burgess Hill. The A23 Trunk Road crosses the area to the west (today by-passing Albourne, Sayers Common and Hickstead) as does the A273, from Hassocks and Burgess Hill to Haywards Heath. The B2036 to Cuckfield runs north-west from Burgess Hill via Abbotsford to Cuckfield and a new, short link road (the A2300) has recently been built linking Burgess Hill with the A23. In the south, the B2116 runs west from Albourne to Partridge Green in Horsham District. Part of a rectilinear network of winding, abrupt-cornered Low Wealden country lanes (typically tree and hedge-lined, some with wide verges), half a dozen long lanes also cross the area from the north to south.

7.7 The landscape to the west of the A23 Trunk Road is strongly rural, quieter and less frequented (particularly around Twineham and Wineham) compared with the area to the east of the road, where the pervasive impact of modern development has altered landscape character. The dominant change has been the post-Victorian expansion of Burgess Hill including the recent westward expansion of the town. Other modern influences in the landscape include roadside commercial and other development along the old A23; modern, large farm and industrial estate buildings; electricity sub stations, sewage works and pylons; suburban village development at Sayers Common; and the Hickstead All England Equestrian Showground and other equestrian centres and land uses. The Hurstpierpoint College buildings are prominent in the view from the downs. Most of the more important roads are busy, as are many of the country lanes, particularly immediately west and south of Burgess Hill.

7.8 Designed landscapes centred on manors and other important historic houses are less dominant a feature in this part of the District than in the scarp footslopes to the south and the High Weald to the north.

Biodiversity

7.9 The biodiversity of the area is considered to be limited due to the extent of modern agricultural cultivation. The farmed landscape contains an extensive network of small woodlands, hedgerows and some hedgerow trees, numerous ponds (including ornamental and mill ponds and water areas in old minerals sites) and areas of tree cover and damp ground in some of the stream valleys. The area contains no Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and four Sites of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCIs). These include meadowland and deciduous woodland largely within the built-up area of Burgess Hill and the large Pond Lye water body valuable for its breeding birds and species-rich neutral grassland.

7.10 The District Council manages the complex of important ancient, coppiced woodlands and meadows in the *Bedelands Local Nature Reserve* (LNR) north of Burgess Hill. Habitats there include Valebridge Pond (open water and reedbed); species-rich willow and alder carr (mainly alder woodland found on low-level ground on floodplains and beside rivers where the water table is either permanently or seasonally near the ground surface); and an outstanding group of species-rich meadows and hedgerows.

Historic character

7.11 The Low Weald in Mid Sussex contains remnants of medieval landscapes, the antiquity of the High Weald landscape being far more apparent. Accordingly, the post-medieval period is most important as the determinant of the historic landscape character of the area. The historic field pattern in this part of the District is a mixture of formal and informal enclosure. However, irregular informal fields characteristic of valley meadow enclosures also occur. Formal enclosure was from woodlands, commons and possibly the re-organisation of assart fields. As elsewhere in many parts of the County and District, modern land use changes have tended to fragment older landscapes, and this part of the Low Weald is no exception.

7.12 The resulting complex field pattern is not always apparent to the eye, since the boundaries of both types of enclosure may be sinuous, or have been altered by subsequent field amalgamation. Some fields in groupings are today large and open, reflecting the particular amalgamation efforts of some local landowners.

The site of the London to Brighton Roman Road crosses the area from north to south and the area is notable for tracks and droveways and historic farmsteads.

Historic parks and gardens

7.13 The area contains 6 historic parks and gardens of local interest and importance at Wineham, Bolney Grange and on the western and southern fringes of Burgess Hill. These include the grounds of *St John's College* north of Hurstpierpoint (see also *para 6.29* for a brief description of the college buildings).

Settlement form and local distinctiveness

7.14 In common with many parts of the Low Weald, the historic settlement pattern of the area has virtually no nucleated villages, and none of any size, being more a mix of scattered farmsteads and hamlets strung out along lanes ('streets' and 'greens'). Much settlement is confined to the lower ridges, above the heavier clay vales.

7.15 The style of rural historic building in the area is diverse. This diversity is also apparent in the range of materials used, including timber-framing, local brick, tile hanging and black-treated weatherboarding for barns. There are few churches in

the countryside, reflecting the lack of nucleated settlements. There is virtually no stone evident apart from the occasional use of Horsham stone for roofing and some limited areas of paving.

7.16 *Hickstead Place* lies close to the Equestrian Showground, a tile-hung house with an 18th Century air but with earlier parts going back to the 15th Century, and in the grounds, *The Castle*, a large summer house dating probably from the early 17th Century. The adjoining house *Westovers* is timber-framed, of 15th Century origin. At Sayers Common, *Christ Church* (1880) is in flint with redbrick dressings.

Burgess Hill

7.17 The town of Burgess Hill lies about two miles south of Haywards Heath and a mile and a half north of Hassocks, located within a clay vale between two of the Adur streams. The southern suburbs rise gently onto a broad ridge linking with the ridge line villages to the south. The town is close to the County boundary and Ditchling Common.

7.18 The town evolved as a railway settlement with two stations associated with the London to Brighton Railway Line and the branch line to Lewes. There was also a large brick and tile industry. Today Burgess Hill is the most populous town in the District (28,803) with extensive new areas of housing and industry. In the 19th Century, development grew around the railway lines and by 1900 the town had significantly increased in size. Development before then was exceptionally piecemeal, the main block centred on the railway station (today the main town centre). Some way to the west, along the London Road and at St John's Common, were built a series of disconnected terraces, individual properties and new frontages on the main road. Edwardian development was equally piecemeal and quite limited, mainly larger houses associated with the existing terraces. Interwar development was more significant but by no means as extensive as in East Grinstead and Haywards Heath. It too tended to consolidate existing blocks, particularly in St John's Common, the separate areas of the town now beginning to join up. At this time, large ribbon developments were built centred on Wivelsfield Station and along Folders Lane to the south.

7.19 However, it was in the post-war period up to 1970 that development was greatly expanded and virtually the entire urban pattern of the town consolidated. The area of the town also expanded significantly, to the west of St John's Common, to the south in the area centred on Oakmeads School and to the east, north of the extensive clay pits and brickyards. Since 1970 the town has extended significantly once again, with large housing developments on the northern edge, north of Folders Lane to the south east and, most significantly, further west with a large mixed housing, retail and industrial development. A western relief road has been built (Jane Murray Way) based on a green crescent of public open space and the new A2300 road link west to the A23 Trunk Road.

7.20 The churches in the town are landmarks, including *St John* (1861-3), a big brick-patterned church with a steeple and *St Andrew* (1907-09), in red brick with no tower. The town also has a large, classical *Congregational Church* of 1881. *Hammond Place* is a 16th century timber-framed house with brick additions.

Strategic gaps

7.21 The County and District Councils have long recognised pressures for development on the open land between Burgess Hill, Hurstpierpoint, Hassocks and Keymer, and Haywards Heath and have designated this land as strategic gaps.

EVALUATION

Change – key issues

- Growing impact of development in the east of the area.
- Continuing amalgamation of small fields, severe hedgerow loss, and the ageing and loss of hedgerow and field trees.
- Visual impact of new urban and rural development including modern farm buildings, horse riding centres and paddocks.
- Pressures for further urban development in the east of the area.
- Introduction of telecommunications masts on ridges.
- Increasing pervasiveness of traffic movement and noise, particularly around Burgess Hill, and busy use of some rural lanes.
- Perceived increased traffic levels on small rural lanes with consequent demands for road improvements.
- Gradual loss of locally distinctive building styles and materials.
- Gradual suburbanisation of the landscape including the widespread use of exotic tree and shrub species.

Landscape and visual sensitivities

- High level of perceived naturalness and a rural quality in the quieter, rural landscape to the west of the A23 Trunk Road.
- Woodland cover and the mosaic of shaws and hedgerows contribute strongly to the essence of the landscape.
- Pockets of rich biodiversity are vulnerable to loss and change.
- Parts of the area are visually exposed to views from the downs with a consequently high sensitivity to the impact of new development and the cumulative visual impact of buildings and other structures.

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MANAGEMENT

Management Objective

Conserve and enhance the quiet, rural qualities of the western part of the area, encourage landscape restoration and woodland management, and ensure that new development is well-integrated within the landscape.

Land Management Guidelines

- Maintain and restore the historic pattern and fabric of the agricultural landscape including irregular patterns of smaller fields.
- Plan for long-term woodland regeneration, the planting of new small and medium-sized broad-leaved farm woodlands, and appropriate management of existing woodlands.
- Promote the creation of arable field margins and corners including alongside the sides of streams.
- Avoid skyline development and ensure that any new development has a minimum impact on views from the downs and is integrated within the landscape.
- Pay particular attention to the siting of telecommunications masts.
- Where appropriate, increase tree cover in and around villages, agricultural and other development and on the rural urban fringe of suburban areas and Burgess Hill, including along the approach roads to settlements and along busy urban routes including the A23 Trunk Road.
- Conserve and replant single oaks in hedgerows to maintain succession, and replant parkland trees.
- Conserve, strengthen and manage existing hedgerows and hedgerow trees, especially around irregular fields, and re-plant hedgerows where they have been lost.
- Maintain and manage all lakes and ponds and their margins for their landscape diversity and nature conservation value.
- Protect the character of rural lanes and manage road verges to enhance their nature conservation value.
- Reduce the visual impact of stabling and grazing for horses.
- Minimise the effects of adverse incremental change by seeking new development of high quality that sits well within the landscape and reflects local distinctiveness.

This area is part of the Low Weald east of the Adur Valley. The Management Objective and Land Management Guidelines above have been incorporated into the ***Planning and Land Management Guidelines Sheet LW10 (Eastern Low Weald)*** included in Part Three. As part of the set of County-wide Land Management Guidelines, the area covered by the Sheet is wider than the area of the Low Weald in Mid Sussex and includes:

The *Hickstead Low Weald (Area 4)* Landscape Character Area in Mid Sussex District.

The *Cowfold and Shermanbury Farmlands (Area J3)* defined in the unpublished ***Horsham District Landscape Character Assessment*** (October 2003).