

Part One

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

INTRODUCTION

Background

1.1 This Landscape Character Assessment of Mid Sussex has been prepared to help protect and enhance the distinctive character of the District and to manage change. It has been drafted in accordance with the *West Sussex Structure Plan 2001 – 2016* and the *Mid Sussex Local Plan* adopted in 2004 and will contribute to work on the forthcoming District Local Development Framework. It will provide the basis for guidance on landscape matters for planners, developers, landowners and communities. The Assessment also aims to raise awareness of the value of the diverse landscapes of the District and to assist communities to relate to a sense of place.

The importance of landscape character

1.2 *Character* is defined as a distinct, recognisable and consistent pattern of elements that makes each landscape or townscape different. Character is influenced by particular combinations and patterns of visual, ecological, historic and cultural elements in the landscape and the pattern of settlement. It includes intangible aspects such as tranquillity and sense of place. The distinctive character of our surroundings has a fundamental impact on our quality of life. Identifying, protecting and enhancing the natural, historic and cultural elements that contribute to character are key activities contributing to sustainability. Part of sustainable planning and land management is concerned with protecting and enhancing landscapes. This includes accommodating change in ways that are responsive to the opportunities, constraints and conditions posed by the characteristics of places.

1.3 If the landscape were unchanging, we would not need policies and plans to protect, conserve and enhance it. Today, we imbue the landscape with a history and an emotional and cultural significance which reaches back to the turn of the 19th Century when landscape became established as an object of wonder and a source of inspiration. We may like to think that the nature and qualities of the landscape are fixed and that the scenery we have long been used to will somehow persist. However, the landscape has always changed, far more perhaps than we realise, and today at an increasing rate and pace. The management of change in the landscape therefore generates the need for an Assessment such as this.

Planning, land management and community context

1.4 Government planning guidance urges the protection and enhancement of the environment, urban and countryside character, the historic environment and local distinctiveness. The Government also sees good quality design as critical to fostering local distinctiveness and sense of place. The new planning system recently introduced calls for greater soundness in preparing plans through the development of a strong evidence base. The Assessment contributes to that evidence base by providing a greater understanding of the nature, value and vulnerabilities of the Mid Sussex landscape.

1.5 Land management decisions by landowners, farmers, statutory bodies and the local authorities themselves have a fundamental impact on the landscape. It is therefore vitally important to influence the multiplicity of landowners involved in managing land in ways that benefit landscape character. A major function of the Assessment will be to exert that influence.

1.6 Communities in the District have close ties to their localities and can provide a genuine local perspective on what the character means to them. In recent years, The District Local Development Framework has also brought increased opportunities for local land use and parish planning, through the ability to include additional advice in Supplementary Planning Documents and Area Action Plans. The Assessment will provide a broad context and information base for community planning initiatives.

1.7 Also of great importance is raising awareness of the local distinctiveness of healthy landscapes as a prime environmental asset in the District and assisting local communities to understand how these can be protected and enhanced. The Assessment will provide a graphic basis for doing this.

1.8 **Appendix 1** summarises briefly the policy background at national, regional, county and local levels including the approach of the District Council. **Appendix 3** refers to land management, community planning and awareness-raising aspects in the context of action by the District Council and its partners.

Purpose of the Assessment

1.9 The purpose of the Assessment is to provide a comprehensive account of the landscape character of Mid Sussex, fostering a greater understanding of its value as an asset for future generations. It complements the Landscape and Biodiversity Strategy *Our Green Heritage* (2001) and the *Landscape and Biodiversity: Supplementary Planning Guidance* (2003) prepared by the District Council. It will support District Council policies and programmes that seek to:

- Attain high quality new development that contributes to and reinforces landscape character.
- Protect and enhance landscape character including the historic landscape.
- Maintain and renew the agricultural landscape.
- Conserve and enhance semi-natural habitats including securing the future of woodlands, hedgerows and trees as distinctive landscape features.
- Promote and celebrate the value and variety of the Mid Sussex landscape.

The Assessment also contains *Land Management Guidelines* for locally distinctive landscapes within the District.

Relationship with other studies

National Character Areas

1.10 In 1996 the Countryside Commission (today the Countryside Agency) and English Nature in association with English Heritage produced a map entitled *The Character of England – Landscape, Wildlife and Natural Features*. The map combines Natural Areas (English Nature) and Countryside Character Areas (Countryside Commission) into a single set of *Character Areas* depicting the natural and cultural dimensions of the landscape in England. A set of regional volumes describing nearly 200 unique landscape and coastal character areas accompanies the Map. In the Introduction to the Map the Commission wrote:

The relationship between ecological and landscape character provides an opportunity to integrate these elements of our natural heritage in a new and exciting way. It is now possible to consider the issues affecting landscape and nature conservation in a single framework.

The Map has given impetus nationally to the carrying out of landscape character assessments and the preparation of associated planning and land management policy and guidance. The Character Areas also provide an ideal framework for monitoring countryside quality.

1.11 The relevant areas in Mid Sussex are referred to in the Assessment as *national Character Areas*. Following the lead given by the District Council in its publications concerning landscape and biodiversity, these areas (South Downs, Low Weald and High Weald) have been used as the framework for presenting information on character at a more local level. The national Character Areas in West Sussex and the Landscape Character Areas within them in Mid Sussex are shown on *Map 1.1*.

Other studies

1.12 The Assessment has been prepared within the context of:

- Existing strategic and planning guidance concerning landscape and biodiversity published by the District Council.
- The unpublished *Landscape Character Assessment of West Sussex* (2003) updating the previous County landscape assessment published in 1995.
- *A Strategy for the West Sussex Landscape* (October 2005) recently published by West Sussex County Council containing general *Landscape Guidelines* that will support District Council policies and programmes seeking to conserve and enhance landscape character.

1.13 The Assessment has also drawn on:

- The regional volume on *Countryside Character in the South East* (1999) accompanying the national *Character of England Map* and published by the Countryside Agency.
- Descriptions of the Areas of the High Weald (1994) and South Downs (1996) Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty published by the Countryside Commission.
- Current Management Plans for the Sussex Downs and High Weald Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
- *Sussex Biodiversity Action Plans* prepared by the Sussex Biodiversity Partnership.
- The background study to the preparation of the High Weald AONB Management Plan *The Making of the High Weald* by Roland Harris (2003).

A new *Integrated Landscape Character Assessment of the South Downs* (forthcoming, 2006) is currently being prepared by the Sussex Downs Joint Committee. The Mid Sussex Assessment has been drafted alongside this new piece of work, and shares Landscape Character Area boundaries with it.

1.14 A variety of books concerning the landscape, economy and social history of the Weald, West Sussex and Mid Sussex District has also been used in the compilation of the Assessment. These range from historical accounts to modern landscape and cultural studies. The documents and sources used to compile the Assessment are listed in **Appendix 7**.

Approach and methodology

1.15 The Assessment is based on the approach described in *Landscape Character Assessment Guidance for England and Scotland* (April 2002) published by the Countryside Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage. The key stages in the process included:

- Desk research.

- Characterisation.
- Analysis and evaluation.
- Stakeholder consultation.

Desk research

1.16 This initial work comprised the following elements:

- Review of existing studies, assessments and other sources concerning landscape character and appreciation relevant to the District including the national and regional context.
- Review of national, regional and local policy and guidance relating to the character of the environment including the programmes of non-statutory bodies; the existing land use planning and land management policies and programmes of the District Council, other relevant local authorities in West Sussex and the AONB agencies; and the programmes of amenity and wildlife organisations.
- Using written records, aerial photographs and mapped information available on a Geographic Information System (GIS), the assembly of information concerning the character and landscape of Mid Sussex District (geology, landform, drainage, soils, land use, vegetation and habitats, biodiversity, field and woodland patterns and types, settlement pattern, local distinctiveness in the built environment, communications, and historic landscape and townscape character and archaeology).

Characterisation

1.17 The principal stage in the Assessment was the identification, mapping and description of areas of distinctive character within the District. This stage concentrated on making clear what makes one area different or distinctive from another. It resulted in the identification of the following:

- *Landscape Character Types*: distinct types of landscape that are relatively homogeneous in character. They share broadly similar combinations of geology, topography, drainage patterns, vegetation and historical land use and settlement pattern. They often occur in more than one place within the District, for example, wooded ridges and valleys and clay vales.
- *Landscape Character Areas*: by comparison, these are unique geographical areas which contain a combination of intimately related landscape types. Each area has its own individual character and identity, even though it shares the same generic characteristics with landscape types in other areas.

This distinction is reflected in the naming of types and areas: landscape character types have generic names – as mentioned above - such as *wooded ridges and valleys* and *clay vales*. However, landscape character areas normally take on the names of specific places such as *Hickstead Low Weald* or *Ouse Valley* or combine a highly distinctive landscape type with a geographical name, for instance, *Fulking to Clayton Scarp*.

1.18 The unpublished *Landscape Character Assessment of West Sussex (2003)* contained an analysis of landscape character types. Because of the complexity and fine grain of the West Sussex landscape, other than in the river valleys and the Low Weald, there was relatively little difference between the numbers of types and the numbers of areas. It was therefore considered unnecessary to carry out a further analysis of landscape character types in Mid Sussex District, relying instead on the typology created at County level.

[continues]

1.19 The Landscape Character Types in Mid Sussex are described as follows:

Open downs

- Smooth, gently rolling elevated downs, scarps and branching dry valleys.
- Steep, mainly open scarp with deeply indented coombes (dry bowls and valleys).
- Large, rectangular arable fields.
- Unimproved chalk grassland.
- Few hedgerows or woodlands.
- Ancient chalkland tracks and prehistoric earthworks.
- Dewponds.
- Few settlements and mainly isolated farmsteads and barns.

Scarp footslopes (the scarp or escarpment is the steep edge of the chalk)

- Gently undulating to rolling lowland, dominated by the chalk scarp.
- Pastures and arable fields with irregular shapes.
- Patchwork of farmstead and woodland interlaced with hedgerows.
- Numerous streams flow northwards or westwards.
- Settlements located where springs emerge from the base of the chalk scarp.
- Network of narrow lanes.

Clay vale farmlands

- Flat to gently undulating lowland clay vales and occasional low ridges
- Mixed arable and pasture farmland
- Medium density of hedgerows
- Small woods, copses and coppice
- Scattered hamlets and farmsteads.

Wooded ridges and valleys

- Steep-sided wooded gills
- Extensive areas of parks and gardens
- Extensive ancient broadleaved woodland and a dense network of hedgerows
- Patches of heathland
- Small scattered farms
- Historic ridgetop settlement.

Forest plateau

- Heavily forested plateau and ridges.
- Steep-sided wooded gills.
- Extensive coniferous plantations and birch-pine woodland.
- Smaller areas of oak, ash, beech and coppiced sweet chestnut.
- Patches of heathland.
- Ridge line roads and buildings.

River valleys

- Mixed farmland and woodland on valley sides.
- Water meadows.
- Variable hedgerow and hedgerow tree cover.
- Curving, narrow strips of woodland and streamside trees.
- Small farms on valley sides.
- Crossed by roads, lanes and railway line.
- Stone and brick bridges.

The relationship in Mid Sussex between national Character Areas, Landscape Character Types and Landscape Character Areas is shown in *Table 1.1*.

Table 1.1: **AREAS OF LANDSCAPE CHARACTER IN MID SUSSEX**

See Map 1.1 for a depiction of the relevant areas.

National Character Area	Landscape Character Type	Landscape Character Area
South Downs	Open downs	Devil's Dyke and Clayton Downs
		Fulking to Clayton Scarp
Low Weald	Scarp footslopes	Hurstpierpoint Scarp Footslopes
	Clay vale farmlands	Hickstead Low Weald
	River valleys	Upper Adur Valley
High Weald	Wooded ridges and valleys	High Weald
		High Weald Fringes
	Forest plateau	Worth Forest
		High Weald Plateau
	River valleys	Ouse Valley

1.20 The Landscape Character Area descriptions and boundaries were refined by a field survey focusing on key visual landscape components including landform, tree cover, field enclosure, settlement patterns, local distinctiveness in the built environment and scenic aspects.

1.21 The characterisation also drew on analysis derived from the *Sussex Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC)* Project currently being carried out by West and East Sussex County Councils and Brighton and Hove City Council in association with English Heritage. The main aim of HLC is to produce a digital map of the historic landscape of Sussex supported by a database that records the details of the attributes of each individual landscape unit. The design of the Sussex HLC draws on the experience of other county HLCs within the overall English Heritage Project, which evolved from the Cornwall method developed in the early 1990s. An initial analysis of the data for Mid Sussex contributes to the description of the Landscape Character Areas and is also summarised in the Part Two concerning the *Mid Sussex Landscape*.

Analysis and evaluation

1.22 The following analysis was undertaken for the District as a whole:

- Examination of the evolution and key features of the Mid Sussex landscape in physical and historic terms.
- Description of the forces for change in the landscape.
- And for each Landscape Character Area:
 - Change in the landscape – key issues for the area.
 - Overall sensitivity of the visual landscape to change.
 - Formulation of a management objective for the area.
 - Production of Land Management Guidelines for each landscape character area.
 - Incorporation of these guidelines into County-based *Land Management Guidelines* Sheets.

Stakeholder consultation

1.23 The draft Assessment was placed before a group of stakeholders, who were asked to comment on and discuss:

- Forces for change in the landscape.
- Content of the characterisation.
- Area boundaries chosen.
- Usefulness of the Assessment and land management Guidelines.
- Uses to which the Assessment might be put.
- Presentation and readability of the document.

Comments received from stakeholders were taken into account in the drafting of the Assessment and are summarised in **Appendix 4**.