



SUMMARY

A wide corridor of low lying arable land relating to the much larger linear character area of the River Medway that extends beyond the Borough boundary. It is large-scale, even featureless landscape, virtually uninhabited but with a network of drainage channels and ditches providing pattern and diversity at the micro-scale.



Key Characteristics

1) **A flat open and large-scale mainly arable valley landscape.**

This area relates to a much larger linear character area of the River Medway that continues beyond the Borough boundary. Although the actual river course lies wholly outside the Borough, it has a major influence on the local landscape character.

The wide clay vale is almost entirely overlain by river gravel and brickearth with an extensive band of alluvium alongside the river channel and extending into the character area towards Whetsted. The land lies mainly below 20m AOD and the flat low land with wide horizons and long views is the dominant characteristic. To the south the rising wooded slopes of the High Weald are an important visual boundary.

The land is predominantly classed as Grade 3 agricultural land with some areas of Grade 2. Generally the land cover comprises large, open, arable fields. Many hedges have been removed to create the large fields, although occasional stag-headed oaks and hawthorn remain standing, marking the location of former field boundaries. The functional unity of the landscape has been changed from that of traditional wet meadows hedged and grazed to open cultivated fields. The former visual harmony has also been disrupted and it now consists of large areas of monochromatic blue-greens of vegetable crops with incomplete or lost hedges often creating a neglected air.

2) **Few settlements or roads in the floodplain due to seasonal flooding, with built development limited to the higher ground at the boundaries of the area. Very open character lacking in prominent features with a feeling of isolation.**

The risk of flooding means that the valley is virtually unsettled with few built elements located on the valley floor and only occasional large farmsteads, such as Latter's Farm, Sherenden Farm and Moat Farm, located at the higher ground at the edge of the character area. Typical vernacular materials include red brick, gable roofs and red tiles. Many buildings are simple in form, creating simple lines with the simple landscape.

3) **Large-scale arable farm units including extensive outbuildings and grain stores occur at the lip of the valley floor.**

These farmsteads, which include extensive out buildings and grain stores, are often highly visible, although not necessarily discordant within the large-scale open landscape. Simple built forms and natural materials such as black painted timber help to integrate these larger developments into the landscape.

4) **Large artificial lakes, probably associated with previous gravel extraction, and localised areas of woodland planting.**

Large, angular lakes in the places closet to the river – in the west of the area north-west of Tudeley Hale and in the east of the area north of Whetsted Road, possibly associated with previous gravel extraction sites. An area of broadleaved woodland links up some smaller areas of ancient woodland north of Stone Castle Farm.

5) **A network of slow moving water channels and tributaries including the Alder Stream and Hammer Dyke introduce pattern and diversity into the landscape at the micro-scale.**

A closer view of the smooth, flat, blue-green floodplain reveals a network of sunken water channels and tributaries including the Alder Stream and Hammer Dyke, creating local pattern and diversity in the landscape. These slow moving linear water bodies are frequently over-deepened with arable farming extending right up to the bank, and can only be discerned by a line of rougher textured vegetation on the immediate water's edge; in early summer white cow parsley signifies their presence.

- 6) **Isolated, due to severance to the south by the rail line running east-west and the River Medway to the north, with a limited road and lane network. However, there is a high concentration of footpaths which cross the area enabling walkers to experience this sense of isolation.**

Outside the character area, the Tonbridge-Paddock Wood railway line exerts a strong influence. This runs in an east-west direction on slightly higher ground at the lip of the valley, severing the valley from the inhabited lower slopes of the High Weald plateau and further increasing the sense of isolation.

The absence of settlement means that very few roads cross the character area, with the exception of the north to south running roads between Tudely Hale and Golden Green and a part of the A228 Whetsted Road along the eastern boundary. These road corridors introduce noise and movement into this otherwise quite featureless, uninhabited valley landscape. The absence of settlement in general results in very dark skies across the area.

Although the road and lane network are limited, there are a number of footpaths which extend across the valley floor and link into the Medway Valley Walk on the river's edge (outside the Borough boundary).

Evidence of Past Use and Cultural Evolution

- 1) There is little historical evidence of human occupation in this area. However, listed farmhouses such as Moat Farmhouse (previously a moated site) date from the 16th or 17th century (and possibly have earlier origins), indicating the floodplain was farmed since then. Historic farmhouses display typical Wealden vernacular including timber-framed buildings with tile hanging and red brick and add a layer of attractive historic interest to the landscape.
- 2) Remnants of older field boundaries can still be seen and routeways follow historic fording points.

Semi-Natural Landscape and Priority Habitats

- 1) Drainage ditches tend to be regularly cleared and generally contain few species, although occasional patches of bur-reed, bulrush and flag iris within the channels are an important feature.
- 2) The pattern of copses, ditches and tributaries has considerable biodiversity potential, under appropriate management.

Valued Features and Qualities

In addition to the valued features and qualities which apply to the whole of the Borough noted in **Chapter 1**, features and qualities considered to be of particular value in the landscape character area are identified below.

This area does not lie within the High Weald AONB. However, the following key qualities related to the AONB are particularly valued in this character area:

- 1) Views to the rising wooded slopes of the High Weald to the south provide an important visual feature in the area.

Other features and qualities considered to be of particular landscape and visual value to the character area include:

- 2) Sense of isolation, relative remoteness and dark skies across the whole area is particularly valued in the context of the proximity of the area to larger settlements including Tonbridge to the west and Paddock Wood to the east.
- 3) The small remaining fragments of ancient woodland, which together with more recent woodland, water channels and drainage ditches, creates an important landscape structure and biodiversity value.

Detractors and Opportunities

In addition to the detractors noted in **Chapter 3**, features which detract from the character area are identified below.

Detractors and Opportunities

- 1) The loss of riparian vegetation, particularly a decrease in bankside and in river vegetation as a result of 'improvements' to the tributaries and vigorous management/clearance of the drainage channels.

Reinstate riparian vegetation and encourage re-naturalisation of watercourses where appropriate.

Landscape Strategy

Borough landscape considerations are detailed in **Chapter 3**, and local objectives are outlined below.

Landscape Strategy

The valued features and qualities of the landscape should be conserved and enhanced.

- 1) Riparian and bankside enhancements should encourage wildlife-sensitive management of the interlinked drainage ditches and watercourses, to include a reduction in the frequency of dredging operations and removal or control of invasive species.
- 2) Development on the edge of the floodplain has the potential to be highly visible from the flat valley floor. Ensure new development is located and designed sensitively and that potential impacts on views and local character are considered during the design of new development.
- 3) Built development is unlikely to be able to be hidden within the landscape, therefore any new development should pay particular attention to built form, materials and scale to ensure it integrates well with the surrounding landscape.
- 4) Maintain the essentially open landscape character. In this respect extensive woodland and tree screen planting (except as part of the hedgerow structure) to 'hide' development will, generally, not be appropriate.
- 5) Conserve and restore permanent pasture adjacent to the Medway, its tributaries (the Alder Stream and Hammer Dyke) and the interconnecting network of ditches as a buffer zone and to conserve visual and ecological continuity within the floodplain. Consider opportunities for re-creation of species-rich valley meadows and pastures using seed of local provenance. Encourage creation of a network of unploughed field margins and environmentally sensitive arable land management to enhance the landscape and habitat diversity of these extensive fields.

- 6) Enhance the ecological potential of the river valley as a wetland habitat. Future potential enhancements include evaluation of the long-term management of the River Medway and its floodplain. Consider short and longer-term initiatives. The restoration of a natural river profile and natural vegetation to the heavily engineered sections and allowing natural flooding should be the ultimate long-term objective. Short-term regeneration of bankside vegetation, removal of invasive alien species and restoration of former habitats such as wet meadow and sensitive restoration of pits used for mineral extraction should be continued and encouraged. Other possible habitat enhancements include the creation of otter refuges.