



What makes this area special?

“We could help others, adults and children, to enjoy this fabulous area, as we know it so well”

Tarrant Gunville – 20th May 2003

Forming part of the extensive belt of chalkland that stretches across southern central England, the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is a landscape of national significance.

The lush, wooded clay Vale of Wardour spreads out through the centre of the AONB, separating two distinct areas of chalk: to the south is the unusually wooded downland of Cranborne Chase with its steeply cut coombes and dry valleys so typical of chalk landscapes; to the north, the West Wiltshire Downs are more elevated, rising up to Grovely Wood on a major ridge.

Traditional downland pasture is now largely confined to the steeper slopes, while large, rectangular fields emphasise the chalklands' open character. The valleys of the Ebble and Wylye support a large proportion of chalk pasture, with many hedgerows and copses. In the north west, the AONB's greensand fringe of wooded ridges and valleys includes rich parklands such as Longleat and Stourhead.

The AONB is of great ecological importance. Its internationally and nationally protected sites range from ancient downland, chalk rivers and meadows to scattered deciduous woodland, which include remnants of the ancient Cranborne Chase royal hunting area and the former Royal Forests of Selwood and Gillingham.

In historic terms, the landscapes of the AONB today are extraordinarily rich. Evidence of successive eras of human activity and settlements can often be lost but not in this AONB; the landscapes offer up evidence of the imprint of man, carved out over the centuries. Prehistoric monuments of national importance, historic borderlands, ancient field systems, droves and routeways all have stories to tell. An Historic Landscape Characterisation was published in 2008¹ that provides the evidence for and descriptions of the historic landscape evolution.

In 2003, an Integrated Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) drew together all the features and attributes that contribute to the distinctive and outstanding character of the AONB. It explored the physical, ecological, visual, historic and cultural forces that shape the present day landscape. Recognising the area as a dynamic, working landscape, it also encompassed the social, economic and recreational characteristics that contribute to its character.

Its special qualities include its diversity, distinctiveness, sense of history and remoteness, dark night skies and tranquillity. With mists slowly forming over sprawling downlands, it can be an almost moody, evocative landscape, with sights and sounds of bygone times, never far away. The immense historic and ecological riches are held in high esteem by local people. The rural, agricultural character is emphasised by widely scattered hamlets and villages. It is a deeply rural area with no large settlements (Tisbury being the largest village in the AONB).

The diversity of the AONB can be appreciated through the eight Landscape Types described within the LCA and set out in pages 62 - 67. Each of the landscape types has a distinct and relatively homogenous character with similar physical and cultural attributes, including geology, landform, land cover, and historical evolution:

- Chalk Escarpments
- Open Chalk Downland
- Wooded Chalk Downland
- Downland Hills
- Chalk River Valleys
- Greensand Terrace
- Greensand Hills
- Rolling Clay Vales

The Landscape Types have been further sub-divided into fifteen Landscape Character Areas that are smaller, discrete areas with a distinct and recognizable local identity. Further details on the special characteristics of each Landscape Type are outlined in the Integrated Landscape Assessment 2003 for the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs and the AONB booklet 'Sustaining Landscape Character' published in 2006.

1. The Historic Landscape Characterisation 2008 and Integrated Landscape Character Assessment 2003 can be downloaded from www.ccrwwdaonb.org.uk