

Area 39

District map showing location of LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREA

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LOCATION

From Lamsden Common, north of Watton-at-Stone, this area extends northwards along the valley to Walkern and up as far as Cromer. It is defined to the west by the urban edge of Stevenage and to the east by the narrow Benington settled ridge and the Cottered/Ardleley settled plateau.

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

Open arable farmland with small grouped woodlands linked by hedges. Medium to large-scale field pattern over strongly undulating slopes, with a remote character despite proximity to Stevenage.



KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- strongly undulating west-facing slope
- sharp transition to ridge to east and to urban edge to west
- built edge of Stevenage generally well concealed and contained by mature and semi mature woodland.
- woods located to the tributary valley heads and on the upper slopes adjacent to Stevenage
- well-managed hornbeam coppice woodland
- large fields and arable cultivation
- few settlements
- expansive views from the edges to the Beane Valley

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

- historic features around Walkern
- Aston End village to the upper slopes a smaller scale intimate landscape with pasture

Beane valley south of Walkern
(J.Billingsley)

PHYSICAL INFLUENCES

Geology and soils. Deep fine loamy over clayey soils with slowly permeable subsoils, over plateau drift (Hornbeam 2 series), with well-drained calcareous loams over chalky drift on the valley slopes (Swaffham Prior series) and slowly permeable calcareous clay soils over chalky till (Hanslope series) on the plateau to the west. Chalk is visible at the surface on both sides of the river.

Topography. Strongly undulating valley slopes.

Degree of slope. 1 in 10 on the steepest slopes to 1 in 40 further north.

Altitude range. 60 m to 100m.

Hydrology. A few streams flow into the river, especially south of Walkern, and the river has a significant impact on local topography, having carved out a well-marked U-shaped valley. The main source of the Beane are the springs to the north of the village, (see Area 221). To the east a narrow plateau forms an interfluvium between the Beane valley and The Old Bourne tributary. The Beane has a predominantly natural chalk stream character, with shallow banks and gravel beds set within an intensively agricultural landscape, but now suffers from reduced flows due to water abstraction at Whitehall. There are no surface streams or ponds on the slopes to the north west.

Land cover and land use. This area consists mainly of intensively cultivated open arable farmland, with a little woodland in the west. The central area and the river valley itself are unsettled, but there is some settlement at the northern and western extremities of the area.

Vegetation and wildlife. Species in the woodlands are predominantly ash, oak and hornbeam, with cherry, blackthorn and poplar. Most of the woodland is ancient with some old secondary woods. There are no elms. Field boundaries are few or missing, although there are examples of young hawthorn hedges and one Scots pine hedge. Hedgerow trees are not common, and consist of oak, of various ages and locally some pear. There is very little grassland in the river valley but orchids can be found in the verges and chalk-tolerant species such as goatsbeard, scabious and bracken are frequent. Formerly there was chalk grassland on Oxshot Hill and on banks below Benington High Wood; now only vestiges remain.

The roadside verge along Walkern road, between Walkern and Watton-at-Stone, supports a rich mix of calcareous herbs and the adjacent arable fields are rich in arable weeds. In 1991 this verge was designated the county's first Heritage Roadside Verge. Benington High Wood, on the eastern slope, is a designated SSSI as one of the best remaining examples in the county of the pedunculate oak/hornbeam woodland of the ash/maple variant. It also contains hazel and midland hawthorn, with dog's mercury and bluebell dominating the ground flora.

Box Wood, to the north west resembles Chilterns woodland and holds a diverse flora, including Green Hellebore, Violet Hellebore etc. It also has dormouse populations, and was, until recently at least, a stronghold for the hawfinch. Uncommon insects have also been recorded from it, such as the ancient woodland beetle *Platycis minuta*.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

On the valley sides there are no significant present day settlement nuclei, but historic evidence, including cropmarks visible on aerial photographs and other data, indicates that the landscape has been exploited since the late Neolithic or early Bronze Age. By the Late Iron Age and Roman periods a pattern of shifting occupation can be traced in the area; archaeological excavations nearby at Lobs Hole and Chells identified settlements spanning the late 1st century to the late 4th century A.D., and Roman finds are known from other sites in the area. Later settlements continued to shift or decline, and the series of earthworks of banks and ditches in Box Wood probably indicates the site of a deserted medieval settlement associated with the Domesday manor of Box. An adjacent field to the east is believed to contain the site of its church.

Field Patterns. Variable; usually large and regular or irregular (which is difficult to discern in the field at this scale) but occasionally appearing to be of a smaller scale around the farms. The large common arable fields of the area indicated by the survival of the names such as Churchend Common, probably originated in the late Saxon period and most survived well into the 19th century, in spite of piecemeal enclosure over the centuries. However the area is now dominated by large fields enclosed in the 18th or 19th centuries, and by later, piecemeal, 20th century enclosure. There are also a few small areas where the smaller fields suggest earlier, pre-18th century irregular enclosure. The arable regime led to woodland clearance at an early date, with the remaining areas of ancient woodland surviving only on the higher slopes on the area. Small areas of 19th and 20th century woodland plantation have had limited impact on its character.

Transport pattern. Winding, narrow-verged lanes link to the wooded plateau settlements of the north east, which focus on Dane End. Whemstead (sic) Road marks the boundary between the valley slope and the plateau, while Walkern Road runs north/south below the plateau edge on the eastern valley slope. To the west a network of narrow lanes links Aston village and Aston End to the encroaching but largely concealed housing development on the edge of Stevenage.

MIDDLE BEANE VALLEY - Area 39

Settlements and built form. The central area and the river valley itself are unsettled, but there is settlement at the northern end and Aston village in the west, very close to the eastern edge of Stevenage. Until the mid-20th century Stevenage was a small town on the Great North Road and appears to have had very little influence on the landscape of this area.

The oldest houses in Walkern date from the 17th century, often with Georgian facades over older structures. Its church has a 14th-century tower and a late Saxon sculpture above the south door. Walkern is described in Munby as 'one of the most attractive street villages in Hertfordshire...a medieval pattern of houses along the street, with crofts behind them and hedges marking the boundary with the arable fields behind' (p. 86).

The village has a 13th-century church, and 16th-century cottages, with little building between the reigns of Elizabeth I and Victoria, but considerable development in the last quarter of the 20th century.

There are a few isolated farms, such as Whempstead Gate Farm and Gregory's Farm, but no hamlets.

OTHER SOURCES OF AREA-SPECIFIC INFORMATION

Rowe, A. The Protected Valley, Hamels Publishing (1999).

Munby, L., The Hertfordshire Landscape, Hodder and Stoughton (1977).



Boxbury Farm, Walkern
(J. Billingsley)

VISUAL AND SENSORY PERCEPTION

From the outside this area is visible from the west, less so from the plateau to the east, being concealed by topography. The overwhelming impressions here are of remoteness, tranquillity and continuity, a sense that nothing has changed much over the centuries. Within the area there are quite extensive views as there is little woodland and the topography is quite simple.

Rarity and distinctiveness. Although this area is similar to the boulder clay plateaux of the north-east of the county, this is its first expression in the centre of the county. It also demonstrates well the south west/north east shift in vegetation patterns across the county, with boulder clay and alluvial gravels on opposite sides of the river, both mixed with chalk.

VISUAL IMPACT

This area is quite widely visible due to its sloping landform and elevated position. It offers extensive views across the Beane valley, which to the east are blocked by the plateau landform. It is a simple, unified landscape of arable fields, rendered more interesting by the often sculptural shape of the landform. Despite the proximity of Stevenage to the west there is very little visual impact from the town.

ACCESSIBILITY

Although readily accessible from both Stevenage and Hertford there are limited recreational opportunities due to the dominance of arable production. A Chain Walk links the extensive footpath network to Watton in the south, and a footpath runs up the valley from Frogmore Hill to Walkern. There are several footpaths from the development on the eastern edge of Stevenage.

COMMUNITY VIEWS

The Beane Valley has been promoted by HCC as a special project. There was insufficient data from the community exercise to establish a perceived level of distinctiveness; this area has been estimated as (D).

"Wide open views... a strong visual boundary that masks the urban area of Stevenage from the open countryside and beyond" (Respondent 4353, SPD Consultation 2006).

LANDSCAPE RELATED DESIGNATIONS

SM : Earthworks in Box Wood
Areas of Archaeological Significance
SSSI: Benington High Wood
Heritage Roadside Verge: Walkern Road

CONDITION

Land cover change:
Age structure of tree cover:
Extent of semi-natural habitat survival:
Management of semi-natural habitat:
Survival of cultural pattern:
Impact of built development:
Impact of land-use change:

Localised
mixed
fragmented
good
interrupted
low
low

STRENGTH OF CHARACTER

Impact of landform:
Impact of land cover:
Impact of historic pattern:
Visibility from outside:
Sense of enclosure:
Visual unity:
Distinctiveness/rarity:

prominent
apparent
continuous
widely visible
open
coherent
unusual

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				

MIDDLE BEANE VALLEY - Area 39**STRATEGY AND GUIDELINES FOR MANAGING CHANGE: IMPROVE AND CONSERVE**

- encourage landowners to safeguard existing hedges, increase hedged field boundaries, create permanent grass strips around field margins and prevent spray drift, using financial incentives as available, with a particular view to enhancing the quality of habitats adjacent to existing high-quality habitats in the Beane valley
- consider the possibilities of creating circular footpath routes in the area, especially from the re-opened railway station in Watton-at-Stone (adjoining area), to take advantage of views over the sculptural landform
- focus hedging opportunities on internal field boundaries, not those along roads and footpaths which could interrupt views over this area
- encourage the conservation of the existing settlement pattern and resist any extensive development which would significantly affect this
- consider the retention/replanting of trees along the watercourse to reflect its location. Care should be taken to select species that will reflect local distinctiveness and a quasi-waterside location but that can survive without a permanent water source
- continue to manage both the established and young woodlands to the western boundary with Stevenage to minimise the visual impact of the settlement on the landscape to the east
- encourage traditional woodland management measures including coppicing