

The High Weald

The High Weald is a distinctive and diverse landscape with a broken and dissected landform of ridges, ghylls and streams and east – west valleys. This is draped in an intricate fabric of small, irregular fields, abundant woods, hedges, ridge top villages, scattered settlements and sunken lanes. The High Weald is a classic patchwork countryside which has remained essentially the same since medieval times.

Location

The High Weald rises to the north of the Low Weald, occupying the northern half of the county. Most but not all of the region is included within the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

Landform

The High Weald is characterised by two bold sandstone ridges running east-west. The northern ridge runs from Ashdown Forest, to Wadhurst, with Crowborough Beacon being the highest point of the High Weald at 225m AOD. The southern ridge runs from

Battle to Fairlight. The river Rother flows between these two ridges. The eastern part of the county is dominated by the broad flat-floored valleys of the lower reaches of the Brede, Rother and Tillingham rivers that meet the sea at Rye harbour.

These main ridges are deeply dissected by secondary streams giving a close network of steep sided valleys known as ghylls. The sandstone creates a number of rock outcrops and the High Weald coast is a striking landform of crumbling sandstone and clay cliffs at Fairlight.

Historical impact of man.

The landscape character of the High Weald as we see it today represents a snapshot view of an historical landscape. The area is distinct from other parts of England in that clearance and established settlement began relatively late. The present settlement pattern began to be established in Roman times and the large scale clearance of woodland began only in the late thirteenth century. Prior to this, woodland was retained and managed to provide fuel for an extensive iron industry.

The present day patchwork landscape of small fields and woods was established by the fourteenth century and so the High

Weald can be described as an essentially medieval landscape, remaining intrinsically the same through the last five centuries.

Woodland

Woodland accentuates the distinctive landform of the High Weald. The area was once almost completely covered by a vast expanse of untamed woodland known to the Saxons as *Andredsweald* – the forest of Pevensey. This is still one of the most densely wooded areas in Britain, with abundant semi-natural ancient woodlands. Many woodlands are small in size being restricted to shaws and woodland belts. They are often narrow and sinuous. The steep sides of the ghylls were never suitable for grazing or cultivation so woodland has survived particularly well in these areas.

Agriculture

The sandy and heavy clay soils of the High Weald do not provide good growing conditions for crops and the area is essentially a pastoral landscape of small fields and hedgerows, mostly supporting sheep and declining numbers of cattle and pigs. Hop gardens and orchards, once abundant in eastern areas, have now all but disappeared to be replaced on south facing slopes by occasional vineyards.

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Other habitats and features

Heathland once extended across much of the sandstone areas of the High Weald, but it is now mainly restricted to Ashdown Forest – a former royal hunting forest. A few unimproved meadows still survive in the High Weald. These are characterised by a diverse range of plant and associated animal species. Large reservoirs are significant features in the High Weald Landscape.

Settlement Pattern and routeways

The High Weald has a distinctive settlement pattern – typically small towns, villages and farms occupy the tops of ridges. A view of a distant village on top of a hill, crowned with a church spire is typical of the High Weald. The settlement pattern is dispersed with nearly 40% of the population living in the countryside in individual dwellings or small hamlets.

The main roads also occupy the ridgeways – these are complimented by a system of radiating roads following ancient droveways. They are often deeply sunken and narrow.

Grand Houses, Gardens and Parkland

The wealth of the iron industry created many grand houses and estates. Many of these have important designed landscapes. Repton was responsible for designs at Bayham Abbey and Heathfield Park and Capability Brown at Ashburnham. There is also a fine parkland at Eridge. The Norman castle of Bodiam dominates the lower valley of the Rother.

Other details

Local sandstone brick, tile and weatherboarding help to create local diversity as do the very distinctive oast houses of the more eastern parts of the area.

Remoteness

The intricate topography of ridges and valleys with an abundance of tree cover helps offset the profusion of lanes, settlements and scattered dwellings. The High Weald often feels very secretive and it is possible to experience a remoteness which is increasingly rare within the south east. The main area of remote countryside is to be found in the east of the area, where scattered development, aircraft noise, gentrification and suburbanisation are less in evidence.

Problems, Pressure and change in the High Weald

Agriculture:

- Decline in the profitability of farming.
- Land falling out of productive use into amenity and residential use with consequent gentrification and neglect.
- Increased reliance on non land based diversification. Loss of skilled labour.
- Increased agricultural intensification in other areas has led to landscape change which sometimes results in degradation.

Woodland:

Woodlands have been affected by:

- Increased coniferisation
- Fragmentation of woodland habitat
- Collapsed timber market
- Decline and neglect of small coppice woodlands and ghyll woodland.
- Rhododendron invasion and deer damage.

Other Landscape features:

- Loss of characteristic features such as meadows and parkland due to inappropriate management
- Loss of heathland due to lack of grazing, particularly in Ashdown Forest

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- Decline of hop gardens and orchards.
- Erosion of sandstone outcrops by climbers and visitors.
- Decline and disappearance of village and farm ponds.

Roads: Increase in road traffic adversely affecting tranquillity, and pressure for new roads and road improvements

Urban influence/ urban fringe problems:

- Suburbanisation, gentrification, poor design and inappropriate use of building materials.
- Increase in street lighting.

Development:

- Inappropriate new development especially around built up areas and particularly related to the location of railway stations.
- Gentrification of old vernacular buildings.
- Increase in inappropriate rural recreation.

Loss of rural function:

- Villages and hamlets have increasingly become dormitories for commuters.
- Habitat loss and fragmentation with resulting loss of species diversity.
- Golf course development.
- Increase in horsiculture.

Recreation: Because of its proximity to the capital (40 miles) the High Weald is subject to recreational pressure. Some honeypot areas are at capacity, Bodiam exemplifies this. With appropriate planning control the High Weald may have the ability to absorb more informal green recreation and tourism. This is becoming increasingly important to the local economy.

Water resources: Over engineering of water courses compromising natural systems. Loss and degradation of ponds and depletion of ground aquifers

Landscape Action priorities for the High Weald

Manage farmland to arrest the decline of the agricultural landscape through agri-environment grants and payments.

Manage woodlands sustainably to prevent further decline in the woodland resource with particular emphasis on ancient woodland, coppice woodland shaws and ghyll woodland.

The creation of new native woodlands should be considered, particularly through natural regeneration.

Control rhododendron invasion and deer and squirrel damage in woodland.

Manage, conserve and restore parkland, hop gardens, orchards, ponds, sandstone outcrops, and iron industry relics where appropriate.

Manage heathland with particular emphasis on the restoration of grazing and the control of invasive species. Limit fire damage. Create larger blocks of heathland where possible.

Maintain and enhance the historic built environment and settlement pattern. Vernacular styles and building materials should be an important aspect of new development. Inappropriate suburban features should be discouraged.

Discourage changes that will have a negative influence on remoteness and tranquility.