

The Low Weald

This broad low lying, gently undulating clay vale underlies a small-scale intimate landscape with an intricate mix of copses and shaws, a patchwork of fields and hedgerows. In the east this gives way to a more open and sometimes prairie- like landscape.

Location

The Low Weald lies between the High Weald and the Downs. It is on average 9 kilometres north to south, extending from Ditchling in the west, to Polegate and Hellingly in the east.

Landform

Broad, low lying, gently sloping clay vales with small greensand ridges underpin the landscape of the Low Weald. This gently undulating countryside, flattens out towards the rivers. In comparison to the High Weald the slopes are very gentle. The land rarely exceeds 40m AOD with many areas below 15m AOD.

The Low Weald is typically dissected by river floodplains. The Ouse and Cuckmere flow southward following winding courses

in wide, very shallow valleys. Small, narrow and commonly sunken streams cut into the heavy clays locally forming flat low-lying areas that are often subject to flooding.

Historical Impact of Man

The history of the Low Weald is similar to that of the High Weald but because of the relatively gentle landform and light soils, it readily supports arable agriculture, but has been subject to far greater modern day change.

The Low Weald supports a prosperous brick and tile making industry which continues to the present day. Clay and sand pits are a characteristic of the landscape, some being significant features.

Woodland and Hedgerows

The Low Weald is much less wooded than the High Weald; considerable areas in the east have almost no woodland cover. Exceptions to this are Plashett Wood, Vert Woods and Abbots Wood, the latter being one of the largest woods in East Sussex. Most of the rest of the woodland is small and restricted to shaws and tree belts. Much of the woodland is coppice with standards, usually Hornbeam with Oak and spectacular carpets of bluebells in spring.

Scattered trees, especially oak, are an important part of the landscape. Many trees are in closely spaced rows along the lines of old hedgerows, disused railway lines, bridleways, green lanes and watercourses. Riparian trees, commonly Alder, are also characteristic of the area. Hedgerows are tall with many mature trees but in the east these have been largely removed to make way for arable agriculture. This has in places given rise to an open prairie character.

Agriculture

The area is generally mixed farming, with the lighter soils on greensand being arable.

Other habitats and features

Wet grazing land and riparian habitats are widespread, particularly in the Ouse Valley.

Settlement Pattern and Routeways

The historic settlement pattern of the Low Weald was one of a preference for the higher and drier sandstone outcrops. The settlement pattern is relatively dispersed; settlements tend to be small, nucleated or linear, following roads. An intricate network of lanes link farms settlements. Many of these are orientated north-south and are considered to be Drove Roads along which farmers moved their animals to access

The Low Weald

the Downs. Typically they meet the steep Bostals which climb the scarp slope of the Downs.

Grand houses, Gardens and Parkland

The area has a wealth of significant stately homes often with historic designed landscapes. Areas of ancient deer park, which are rich in archaeological and wildlife interest, are a feature of this landscape. Moated gardens and monastic grounds such as Claverham House and Michelham Priory are also significant.

Other details

Older houses are usually built of brick and timber with tiles made from the local weald clays. Timber framed buildings are more common in the east. Nearer the Downs, flint buildings and walls are a feature as flint was quarried from the chalk hills. Wealden sandstone was used extensively, especially where the Greensand outcrops occur locally. Heavy Horsham stone tiles appear on larger buildings and especially churches.

Remoteness

The topography of the Low Weald is gentle, and a good cover of hedges, trees and small woods help to afford a significant degree of remoteness in many areas.

Problems pressure and change in the Low Weald

Agriculture: Agricultural intensification has led to significant removal of hedgerows creating some prairie-like landscapes. Modern farm buildings and associated clutter are highly visible, especially from the Downs

Woodland and hedgerows: Woodland quality has declined due to lack of traditional management, particularly coppicing. Replacement of the native deciduous woodland with extensive conifer plantations has detracted from landscape quality and character. There has been a loss and decline of hedgerows and trees and consequent fragmentation of landscape structure. This is due to lack of management and changes in farming practices.

Roads: Traffic is a major influence on tranquility. Recent bypasses of towns, such as Uckfield and Polegate, have had an impact on the countryside. Rural lanes are affected by increasing traffic.

Urban influence/ urban fringe problems:

The creeping intrusion of urban land use and suburban living is spreading from the main settlements. This is manifested in modern ribbon development and small holdings along roads. Pony paddocks and wire fencing have replaced traditional field patterns and hedges. Uncharacteristic planting detracts from the traditional and historic sense of place. The general clutter of urban land use, such as business and road signs, road markings, bollards and lighting detract from rural character.

Development: The Low Weald of East Sussex is under increasing development pressure. Gentrification of vernacular buildings and landscapes erodes the local character of towns and villages.

The Low Weald

Recreation: There are some popular local attractions: Arlington Reservoir, Abbots Wood, Michelham Priory, Ditchling Common Country Park and Barcombe Mills. The area is well served by rural lanes and Rights of Way and has great potential for informal recreation and access.

Water Resources: The Ouse and Cuckmere rivers and their catchments are significant features of the area. There has been a loss of characteristic wetland features such as wet meadows, riparian woodlands and reedbeds.

Landscape Action Priorities for the Low Weald

Encourage the uptake of farm environment plans to conserve the essential landscape structure of hedges, trees and small woods. Improve the screening and integration of farm buildings and associated clutter with bold tree planting.

Manage woodland sustainably to prevent further decline of the woodland resource with particular emphasis on ancient woodland, coppice, shaws, hedgerows and riparian woodlands. Encourage the conversion of conifer woodland to broadleaved.

Establish boundaries for development on the edges of towns and villages with new screen tree planting. Tree planting on a large scale to improve landscape character and counter climate change.

Conserve and enhance the historic built environment and settlement pattern. New development should be carefully located and designed to compliment and sit comfortably with local landscape character. Use of vernacular styles and building materials should be considered where appropriate. The design of new development should include buildings and their setting down to the detail of hard landscape layout. Proposed planting schemes should also reflect local character.