

7. GREENSAND HILLS



LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREAS

7A Donhead - Fovant

7B Penselwood - Longleat

TYPE 7: GREENSAND HILLS

Description

The transition from the clay lowlands to the elevated chalk beyond is marked by a series of greensand hills. These run along the north and south sides of the *Vale of Wardour (8A)* and along the north-western boundary of the AONB between Penselwood and Warminster. Although composed of Upper Greensand, tributaries of the major rivers have eroded the Greensand to expose underlying older deposits. These hills are characterised by tight valleys, sunken lanes and are typically covered in woodland. The patterns of settlement are also distinctive. Villages are hidden among these hills, focused on the springline at the junction of the Chalk and Greensand, tucked into the valleys. The hills have historically provided desirable locations for siting large houses and parklands as well as providing strategic sites for fortified settlements and buildings where they have commanding views over the adjacent lowlands. Views vary between enclosed and framed to open and panoramic.

Key Characteristics

- Upper Greensand is exposed as a band between the older clays and younger chalk.
- The Greensand typically forms upstanding hills that have been eroded by tributaries of the major rivers into a series of rounded knolls and deep valleys.
- Hills support a large proportion of woodland, both deciduous and coniferous.
- Country houses and estates, set within landscaped parkland contribute to the scenic beauty of the area.
- Distinctive patterns of settlement include villages hidden in the shelter of the deep valleys.
- Fortifications are strategically located on the hill tops.
- Ancient sunken lanes wind their way through the hills.
- Small and irregular fields characterise areas of agricultural land use.
- Meadows and wet woodland are typical of the valley floors.

7A DONHEAD - FOVANT GREENSAND HILLS



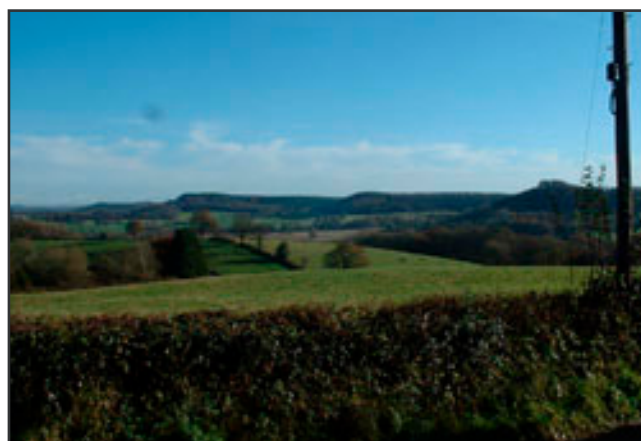
Steep slopes are clothed in woodland, both deciduous and coniferous.



Deep coombs provide shelter for settlement.



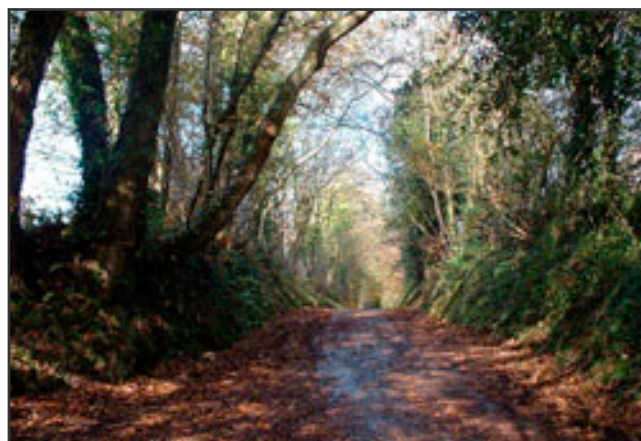
The land form is distinctly undulating.



The wooded ridges of the Greensand Hills stand out above the *Vale of Wardour* (8A).



Stone villages are sheltered within the steep-sided valleys.



Ancient sunken lanes are enclosed by high banks and shaded by trees.

7A DONHEAD – FOVANT HILLS

Key Characteristics

- The *Donhead-Fovant Hills* occur as exposures of Upper Greensand around the anticline of the *Vale of Wardour (8A)*.
- The Upper Greensand has been eroded into a series of rounded knolls by tributaries of the River Nadder, many of which have carved deep valleys (or combes) into the Greensand.
- Steep slopes are clothed in woodland, both deciduous and coniferous.
- Irregular and indented outlines around many of the areas of woodland indicate early assart incursions and inclosure of fields.
- Villages are hidden in the shelter of the deep valleys, or combes, which cut through the Upper Greensand.
- Fortifications are strategically located on the hill tops overlooking the *Vale of Wardour*.
- Ancient sunken lanes, enclosed by high banks and shaded by trees, produce strongly framed views.
- Historic estates and parkland are typical, including Fonthill Abbey and Phillips House.
- Woodlands and meadows are important nature conservation habitats.
- A peaceful landscape with great variety at the small scale, but with an overall unified character.

Location and Boundaries

The *Donhead-Fovant Hills* character area wraps around the *Vale of Wardour (8A)*, enclosing it on all sides. To the south, the hills separate the rolling valley landscape of the *Vale of Wardour (8A)* from the flat landscape of the *Greensand Fovant Terrace (6A)*. To the north the hills separate the rolling lowland landscape of the *Vale of Wardour (8A)* from the upland chalk landscape of the *West Wiltshire Downs Open Chalk Downland (2A)*.

Summary of Visual Character

The *Donhead-Fovant Hills* is a landscape with a distinctive undulating landform. Its tight valleys, sunken lanes and high proportion of woodland cover all contribute to an enclosed landscape of intimate spaces. Stone villages contain picturesque cottages that lie nestled within the tight valleys, sheltered by landform and woodland. The strong silhouette of the *Fovant and Chalke Escarpment (1C)* forms a skyline beyond the hills to the south. This is a landscape of contrasts, between the shaded sunken lanes and the open and exposed hill tops - providing a range of viewing experiences from strongly framed views down the enclosed sunken lanes to the panoramic views over the *Vale of Wardour (8A)*.

PHYSICAL INFLUENCES

Geology and soils

The younger chalk has been eroded away to expose outcrops of Upper Greensand that occur as narrow strips around the anticline of the *Vale of Wardour (8A)*. Younger layers of Upper Greensand remain upstanding at the hill tops while older rocks, including Gault, are exposed at the boundary with the *Vale of Wardour (8A)*. Greensand is a sandy rock giving rise to a well drained fine loamy soil that is slowly permeable and is susceptible to water erosion. This is evident around the headwaters of the Nadder where water erosion has caused widespread landslip.

Landform and Hydrology

The Upper Greensand forms an undulating band of hills, generally between 80 and 200m AOD, along the southern and northern sides of the *Vale of Wardour (8A)*. Along the south side of the vale the hills represent the north-facing edge of the *Fovant Greensand Terrace (6A)* and have been carved into a series of rounded knolls by the streams which drain northwards into the River Nadder. Several of these streams have cut through the greensand ridge to form steep sided valleys draining the *Fovant Greensand Terrace (6A)*. Elsewhere the landform is remarkably smooth, for example where it forms the setting for Wardour Castle. Around the settlement of Donhead St Mary, the Upper Greensand has been eroded into a series of deep valleys by the headwaters of the River Nadder.

The band of Upper Greensand along the northern side of the valley is narrower than that to the south, creating a less distinct series of hills between Dinton and East Knoyle. At Dinton the hills create a ridge which must be crossed before the gently sloping West Wiltshire Downs are reached. Tributary valleys push through the *Greensand Hills* at Fonthill Bishop and Chilmark. Further west, the Greensand band widens, forming Beacon Hill near East Knoyle.

Land Cover

This area contains a mosaic of permanent pasture and mixed woodland with fen and neutral meadows on the valley floors. The steep slopes of the *Donhead-Fovant Hills* along the northern and southern sides of the *Vale of Wardour (8A)* are clothed in woodland. Although there are some areas of broadleaf woodland (some of ancient origin), coniferous plantations predominate, giving the hills a very different character to the chalk downs. The sandy influence of the soils is visible in the presence of acidic woodlands. Around Donhead St Mary, and in the valleys and bowls along the southern side of the *Vale of Wardour (8A)*, hill top woodland give way to pasture as the land drops away towards the valley below.

Biodiversity

In contrast with the open landscape associated with the widespread chalk downland, the *Donhead – Fovant Greensand Hills* represents a heavily wooded landscape. Much of this woodland, for example Compton Wood, is of ancient origin, while some such as that around Fonthill Abbey have been widely planted with coniferous species. Two woodlands within the character area have statutory nature conservation designation, namely Hang Wood (SSSI) and Gutch Common (SSSI).

Hang Wood (SSSI) is botanically rich woodland formed in a moderately sloped valley with a central stream. The woodland composition varies according to topography, but generally falls within two broad community types namely, wet ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) and field maple (*Acer campestre*) woodland or acid oak (*Quercus robur*), hazel (*Corylus avellana*) and ash woodland. The site has a history of traditional coppice management, and supports a rich associated ground flora, with species such as bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*), dog's-mercury (*Mercurialis perennis*), and sweet woodruff (*Galium odoratum*) the most conspicuous species.

The majority of Gutch Common (SSSI) also falls within the character area, and comprises a mosaic of habitat types including wet and dry acid woodland, open bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) stands and a neutral meadow. This habitat diversity has resulted in the site supporting a wide range of plant species, together with a good range of woodland birds.

Aside from the significant contribution that these woodlands make to the biodiversity of the area, other habitat types are also represented, for example at Lower Coombe and Ferne Brook Meadows (SSSI) where important examples of fen meadow and neutral meadow can be found.

The table below highlights the features of key ecological interest for the designated areas.

Site name	Designation	Site area (ha)	Summary of importance
Hang Wood	SSSI	20.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ancient valley woodland, with rich associated woodland flora and fauna
Gutch Common (71% of this SSSI falls within LCA 7A)	SSSI	35.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mosaic of wet – dry acid woodland, meadows, bracken stands and acidic wet flushes
Lower Coombe and Ferne Brook Meadows	SSSI	11.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fen meadow and unimproved neutral grassland
Teffont Evias Quarry / Lane Cutting (55% of this SSSI falls within LCA 7A)	SSSI	3.6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Geologically important site

HUMAN INFLUENCES

Evidence of Past Social Structure

The strategic importance of the hills as transitional landscapes flanking the *Vale of Wardour* (8A), the *West Wiltshire Downs* (2A) to the north and the *Fovant Greensand Terrace* (6A) to the south, is reflected in the presence of Iron Age hillforts at Wick's Ball Camp, Castle Ditches and Castle Rings. The wider western extents of the hills have remained essentially rural in character, but elsewhere a number of large country estates, such as at Wardour Castle, surrounded in the 18th and 19th centuries by landscaped parkland and plantations, are dominant features of the landscape.

Field Patterns, Boundaries and Predominant date of enclosure

The dominant field pattern in the area is small and irregular with many fields divided by ditches and banked hedgerows. The irregular indented outline of many of the woodland areas indicates early assart incursions and inclosure of fields. The wider areas to the west are characterised by a mixture of relatively small fields, some with irregular boundaries indicating the early (pre-Parliamentary) inclosure of open fields. Others, with straight sides, possibly reflect the later rationalisation of an earlier field system. Some of the larger areas of woodland, plantation and parkland reflect the locations of a number of substantial landscaped estates, such as Wardour Castle and Fonthill - the site of William Beckford's collapsed mock gothic Fonthill Abbey.

Land Use and Recreation

This area contains a mosaic of permanent pasture and mixed woodland. The steeper slopes are characterised by deciduous or coniferous woodland with hanging woodland a feature of the steepest slopes. The commercial nature of many of the woods is reflected in the presence of coupes which have been clear felled and re-planted, creating irregular skylines on some of the hills. This mosaic of land uses further accentuates the small scale character of the area. A network of ancient sunken lanes follow the valley bottoms providing links between the *Vale of Wardour* and adjacent chalk landscapes. Many of these lanes are enclosed by steep banks and shaded by woodland.

The Wessex Ridgeway briefly crosses the Greensand ridge west of Beacon Hill. The landscape parks and historic houses form an important visitor resource. Philipps House is a neo-Grecian house and a National Trust property that is open to the public. The surrounding landscape park of Dinton has been restored and offers many attractive walks. Although the remains of Fonthill Abbey are private, to the south lies Fonthill House Gardens and these are open to the public several times a year.

Historic Development of Settlement and Relationship with the Landscape

Although there is evidence, for instance at Castle Ditches hillfort, of substantial early settlement, occupation may have been temporary - either seasonal or during times of political tension - offering security to a farming population which for most of the time was widely dispersed in the adjacent landscape. To the west the hills were relatively densely settled during the medieval and post-medieval periods, with closely spaced villages, hamlets and farmsteads.

Settlement and Built Character

The *Donhead-Fovant Hills* are surprisingly well settled. Along the south side of the *Vale of Wardour (8A)* a series of villages are hidden in the deep valleys, or combes, which cut through the Upper Greensand. Ansty, Swallowcliffe and Fovant, for example, are almost triangular villages set at the heads of the valleys which separate the rounded greensand hills. Although roads between the *Fovant Greensand Terrace (6A)* and *Vale of Wardour (8A)* pass through these valleys and the villages within them, the villages are generally well concealed when viewed from the surrounding landscape. The location of villages would have provided water together with access to the downs (reflected in their names e.g. Fovant Down and Swallowcliffe Down) and the pastures of the *Vale of Wardour* to the north. The hills also provided defensible sites as indicated by Castle Ditches Fort and Wardour Castle.

Around Donhead St Mary and Donhead St Andrew the valleys carved by the headwaters of the Nadder are laced with narrow lanes. Cottages and farms are scattered along these lanes, furthering the impression of an intimate, settled landscape.

A similar, though less obvious, pattern of settlement is found along the north side of the *Vale of Wardour (8A)*. Villages such as Teffont Magna, Chilmark and Fonthill Bishop are sited at the heads of shallower valleys which drain through the greensand to the valley below. Although these villages are hardly visible within the wider landscape they do have a particular character, reflecting their unusual valley-head location and the use of local building materials (such as the local Chilmark stone) and styles. Clay tiles and thatch are the dominant roof materials.

Historic Environment

The presence of large areas of commercial forestry reflects the former presence of deerparks and landscaped parkland along the fringes of the Nadder Valley, locations popular with the landed gentry. Beyond these, the tightly spaced farmsteads and small villages, with evidence of earlier inclosure, indicate the mixed agricultural character of the wider landscape, a feature evident in the locations of the late prehistoric enclosures. The key visible historic components are the Iron Age hillforts at Wick's Ball Camp, Castle Ditches and Castle Rings, and the landscaped parkland and country houses at as at Fonthill and Phillips House.

EVALUATION

Strength of Character

This is a landscape of **strong** character as a result of its distinct and recognisable pattern of elements - the rounded knolls clothed in woodland and crowned by ancient fortifications, with villages and ancient sunken lanes hidden in the shelter of combes. It is an instantly recognisable landscape forming a strong contrast to the adjacent chalk and clay landscapes.

Current Condition

The landscape possesses a high degree of intactness and integrity with good survival of landform and earthwork features, survival of the typical small scale, irregular fields, few areas of underused land and a good state of repair of built features. However, the replanting of native woodlands by blocks of conifers has eroded the ecological condition of some of the woodlands and many hedgerows have been heavily flailed or lost altogether. The overall condition of the landscape is perceived to be **good**.

Past and Present Change

- Some hedgerow field boundaries have been intensively flailed or lost altogether.
- Agricultural improvement in the past has resulted in rationalisation of an early field system of small, irregular fields into larger field units and decline of fen and neutral meadows on the valley floors.
- There has been a gradual decline in traditional woodland management techniques as skills have been lost and forestry has concentrated on coniferous species.

- Conifer coupes within deciduous woodland are visually intrusive, particularly where they occur on skylines. The presence of coniferous coupes means rate of change in the landscape is rapid during felling of large coupes.
- There is evidence of a decline in grazing with marginal pastures no longer actively grazed and being invaded by scrub.
- There are considerable pressures for new built development within the attractive villages as well as redevelopment of agricultural buildings to residential, amenity or industrial use creating broader economic activity but a change in landscape character.

Possible Future Trends

The impact of Foot and Mouth and BSE will result in increasing professionalisation of livestock farming resulting in the decline of small livestock businesses making it more difficult to keep livestock as a part time hobby. This means that there is likely to be limited availability of livestock to graze marginal land (often of high environmental value). The result of this may see a possible transfer of land from agricultural to amenity land use. There is also likely to be a decline in traditional forms of environmental management, such as hedgerows and ditches, due to a decline in farm labour and lack of money for such activities.

There is likely to be further pressure for new built development within the attractive villages as well as redevelopment of agricultural buildings to residential, amenity or industrial use.

The presence of coniferous coupes means rate of change in the landscape is potentially rapid - felling of large coupes results in instant change and sharp lines on the hills. There is likely to be an improvement in woodland structure and management.

Overall, future trends imply that landscape condition may **decline** in the future.

Management Objective

The overall management objective should be to conserve the rich mosaic of land uses and the contrast between the shaded, enclosed combes and exposed hills. Woodland conservation and management is key in this wooded landscape.

- Consider re-planting hedgerows and hedgerow trees where these have been lost.
- Encourage traditional management of hay meadows on the valley floors.
- Conserve the small scale pattern of irregular fields that are characteristic of the hills.
- Consider restoring traditional management techniques, such as coppicing to encourage a diverse age structure and a rich ground flora. Encourage interest in, and marketing of, local wood products.
- Consider removal of conifers where they are particularly visible, for example on skylines. Typical woodland types in this area include wet ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) and field maple (*Acer campestre*) woodland or acid oak (*Quercus robur*), hazel (*Corylus avellana*) and ash woodland.

- Encourage sensitive forestry practices, for example mixing different species and felling small coupes.
- Encourage extension of semi-natural habitats such as fen meadow, unimproved neutral grassland, acid woodland, meadows and wet flushes.
- Avoid urbanisation of lanes through addition of signs, road markings and concrete kerbs or lamp posts.
- Further built development should respond to the villages' character, avoiding the use of standard 'suburban' designs and details - attention to details such as drives, curbs, footways, fencing and plot size will be critical.

7B PENSELWOOD - LONGLEAT GREENSAND HILLS



Cley Hill is an isolated outcrop of Upper Chalk supporting an Iron Age Hill Fort.



Forestry is a major land use of the area.



Deep valleys have been carved by tributary streams.



Many of the hills are densely wooded,



Thatched cottages lie hidden in the woodland.



Settlement is scattered along the valleys - older buildings are constructed from limestone.

7B PENSELWOOD – LONGLEAT HILLS

Key Characteristics

- A series of eroded Upper Greensand hills creating a sinuous escarpment containing some deep valleys.
- Fluvial erosion of the Frome and Stour tributaries has exposed older rocks.
- The hills are clothed in deciduous woodland and coniferous plantations.
- Neatly laid hedges, tree clumps, avenues and grazing animals associated with private estates contribute to the scenic beauty of the area.
- Fields are predominantly small and of an irregular form - indicative of early inclosure.
- Extensive landscaped parks surrounding large country houses at Longleat and Stourhead.
- A wide range of habitat types including wet woodland, unimproved chalk grassland and ancient woodland, with five designated nationally important wildlife sites.
- Pockets of dense development occur in the shelter of the deep valleys that cut through the Upper Greensand.
- Earthworks and ruins of hill forts and castles are strategically located, on the hill tops.
- Landscape parks and historic estates provide important recreation attractions including Centre Parcs Holiday Village, Longleat Estate and National Trust properties.
- A peaceful landscape with great variety at the small scale, but with an overall unified character.

Location and Boundaries

The *Penselwood-Longleat Hills* are the west-facing edge of the band of Greensand that extends beyond the *Kilmington Greensand Terrace (6B)* from Mere to Warminster – to the south-west and north-east of the AONB respectively. Their boundary of the hills with the terrace landscape is clearly defined by a change in density of contours and amount of woodland. To the north-west is a gradual transition into the clay valley of the Frome that lies beyond the AONB boundary.

Summary of Visual Character

The *Penselwood-Longleat Hills* is a landscape with a steeply undulating landform- it is a landscape of secretive valleys and exposed hills where the sunken lanes high proportion of woodland cover contribute to an enclosed character. Picturesque villages lie sheltered by landform where mature oaks and stone walls provide a sense of history and permanence. Views vary between enclosed and framed to the open and panoramic. Extensive woodland, forestry operations and designed parkland provide a unifying feature across the area and form a strong contrast to the open character of adjacent farmed landscapes. This area

remains peaceful and rural despite the large number of visitors that are accommodated within its bounds.

PHYSICAL INFLUENCES

Geology and soils

There is greater variation in the underlying geology of this character area than in the *Donhead-Fovant Hills (7A)*. The younger chalk has been eroded away to expose the Upper Greensand series of the Cretaceous period over much of the area. However, towards the north-west older rocks are exposed, particularly where tributaries of the Frome or Stour have eroded the Greensand to expose underlying older deposits such as Corallian Rocks and Oxford Clays of the Jurassic Period. A prominent outcrop of Upper Chalk is left standing at Cley Hill beside the A362 to Warminster. Greensand is a sandy rock that gives rise to a well drained fine loamy and silty soils that are generally well drained. Soils in the valleys tend to be loamy, clayey, slowly permeable and seasonally waterlogged.

Landform and Hydrology

The *Penselwood-Longleat Hills* comprise the west facing edge of the band of greensand which extends from Mere to Warminster at an elevation of between 120m and 245m AOD. The Upper Greensand has been eroded by a series of small streams and rivers, in this instance draining north and west towards the river Frome and south towards the Stour. Around Penselwood and Stourton the headwaters of the Stour have eroded a series of deep river valleys which cut in behind the main greensand escarpment. Similarly, around Horningsham and Longleat the headwaters of the Frome have created a series of valleys and rounded hills. Much of the western edge of this character area drains towards the River Brue.

Land Cover

The comparatively steep slopes of the hills are clothed in woodland. Although much of the woodland is managed as coniferous plantation, some substantial areas of broadleaved woodland remain, for example west of Longleat and Stourton. At Stourhead and Longleat the stately homes and their immediate parklands are set within extensive areas of wooded pasture. As well as woodland and parkland, pastoral fields and hay meadows contribute important landcover elements to the landscape.

Biodiversity

The *Penselwood – Longleat Greensand Hills* support significant ecological and nature conservation interest, including a wide range of habitat types, such as wet woodland, unimproved chalk grassland, neutral hay meadow and a small section of the River Avon System. However, ancient woodland is perhaps the most distinguishing feature and is still relatively widespread throughout the character area, despite much having been replanted with coniferous species. In total the area contains all or part of five nationally important wildlife sites, these being Bradley Woods (SSSI), Cley Hill (SSSI), Heath Hill Farm (SSSI), Longleat Woods (SSSI) and the River Avon System (SSSI).

Bradley Woods (SSSI) is an extensive area of lowland alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) woodland, with oak (*Quercus robur*) and hazel (*Corylus avellana*) dominating on the drier ground. The site has largely been managed under a coppice regime, and supports a rich ground flora. Many plant

species are present which indicate a long continuity of woodland cover, for example dog's mercury (*Mercurialis perennis*), yellow archangel (*Lamiastrum galeobdolon*) and ramsons (*Allium ursinum*), and several locally restricted plants such as marsh violet (*Viola palustris*), and thin-spiked wood sedge (*Carex strigosa*). However, the most notable feature of this woodland is its exceptional diversity of bryophytes and lichens, including several species with nationally restricted distribution.

Longleat Woods (SSSI) provides a further example of a nationally important ancient woodland site found within the character area. This woodland has a high forest structure, and has developed over a range of soil conditions reflected in the diverse range of woodland stand types.

Aside from the dominant wooded habitats, this character area also supports nationally important grassland sites, including the botanically rich chalk grassland of Cley Hill (SSSI). This site is located to the north of the AONB, and situated on a steep hill, which is elevated some 80m from the surrounding land and represents an outlying site formed on the Middle and Upper chalk. Heath Hill Farm (SSSI) is an important example of unimproved neutral to calcareous hay meadow and pasture - representing a fine example of this rapidly diminishing habitat type.

The table below highlights the features of key ecological interest for each statutory site.

Site name	Designation	Site area (ha)	Summary of importance
Bradley Woods	SSSI	48.7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extensive area of lowland alder wood, with rich associated lichen and bryophyte flora
Cley Hill	SSSI	26.6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unimproved chalk grassland Colony of early gentian (<i>Gentianella anglica</i>), a species listed under the Habitat Directive (Annex II), a UK BAP priority species and UK endemic
Heath Hill Farm	SSSI	20.7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A number of adjacent unimproved neutral to calcareous hay meadows and permanent pastures
Longleat Woods	SSSI	249.9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extensive ancient woodland with high forest structure Population of dormice (<i>Muscardinus avellanarius</i>) a UK BAP priority species Supports a wide range of breeding bird species
North Brewham Meadows (0.5% of this SSSI falls within LCA 7B)	SSSI	8.9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wet, neutral hay meadow
River Avon System (0.4% of this SSSI falls within LCA 7B)	SAC SSSI	498.2 507.8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> River system noted for its exceptional aquatic plants, diverse fish fauna and range of aquatic invertebrates Supports stands of floating <i>Ranunculus</i>, a vegetation type of European importance as listed under the Habitats Directive (Annex I) Population of sea lamprey (<i>Petromyzon marinus</i>), brook lamprey (<i>Lampetra planeri</i>), Atlantic salmon

			<p>(<i>Salmo salar</i>), bullhead (<i>Cotto gobius</i>) and Desmoulin's whorl snail (<i>Vertigo moulinsiana</i>) all listed under the Habitats Directive (Annex II), and the latter a UK BAP priority species</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Populations of the freshwater pea mussel (<i>Pisidium tenuilineatum</i>) a nationally rare mollusc and UK BAP priority species, and <i>Valvata macrostoma</i> a nationally vulnerable mollusc
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HUMAN INFLUENCES

Evidence of Past Social Structure

A series of earthwork enclosures and hillforts along the edge of the Greensand terrace (such as at Park Hill Camp and Castle Wood, Stourton and Roddenbury Hill, and on outlying hills, as at Cley Hill in the north) indicate the strategic importance of the Greensand Hills. These hills were important because they formed the boundary between the downland landscape to the east and the clay vales to the west, each offering different economic resources. Cley Hill is an Iron Age hill fort (about 300 BC) with a single rampart that encloses 17 acres. Two Bronze Age barrows, excavated in the early 19th century, lie inside the hilltop. One of these is silhouetted for miles.

The present day wooded character of the area reflects the originally more extensive medieval Royal forest of Selwood Forest, forest law giving the Crown rights to exploit the land's resources, especially for hunting. The continuing strategic importance of the landscape is evident through the presence of a number of castles, such as the motte and bailey earthworks at Coneygore and Zeals Row, to the south, and Woodhouse Castle and Hale's Castle further north.

Field Patterns, Boundaries and Predominant date of enclosure

Much of the woodland within the area comprises coniferous plantations, bounded by pastures along the foot of the Greensand escarpment. The dominant field pattern in the area is small and irregular (particularly apparent to the west) and is indicative of early inclosures. These contrast with the straight-sided but still irregular fields at the edges of the woodland – a likely reflection of the 19th century or later rationalisation of earlier inclosed fields, and the influence of agricultural improvements associated with the large area of estate land. Individual fields are often divided by hedgebanks and hedgerows that are generally intact. Limestone walls are also strongly associated with the estates and villages.

Land Use and Recreation

Although there are some considerable areas of broadleaved ancient woodland, there are also large tracts of coniferous plantation, exploited as commercial timber. The presence of felling coupes, stacked wood and saw mills add a distinctive character to the area. Other land uses include permanent pasture and private gardens/parkland. Although these cover a smaller area, they provide an important contribution to landscape character where neatly laid hedges, tree clumps, avenues and grazing animals contribute to the scenic beauty of the area.

This is a landscape of significant leisure and recreation interest including the attractions of Centre Parcs Holiday Village, Longleat Estate and National Trust properties including Stourhead, Alfred's Tower, Cockroad Wood and Cley Hill Fort. Centre Parcs is sited amongst hundred-year-old Giant Redwoods and comprises cycle paths and a sports lake. The Longleat Estate provides many attractions including Longleat House, Longleat Safari Park, extensive grounds and mazes. It also provides coarse fishing and puts on special events such as ballooning. The National Trust's Stourhead House and Garden attracts many visitors due to its outstanding example of the English landscape style, laid out between 1741 and 1780. Classical temples are set around the central lake at the end of a series of vistas. The site also contains mature woodland and an extensive collection of exotic trees. Alfred's Tower, to the north-west of Stourhead Gardens is one of the finest triangular folly towers in the country. Parking areas tend to be accommodated within woodland where they are unobtrusive.

There are also many local forest walks and three long distance Public Rights of Way routes - the Macmillan Way/Leland Trail that follows the ridge past Alfred's Tower, the Stour Valley Way past Stourhead and the Monarch's Way that passes Ballands Castle.

Historic Development of Settlement and Relationship with the Landscape

The number of enclosures and hillforts along the Greensand scarp indicates the relationship to the settlement of the adjacent terrace landscape during the late prehistoric period. Although the presence of Royal forest in the medieval period did not preclude settlement, the establishment in the 16th and 17th centuries of large estates and, in the following centuries, the laying out of extensive landscape parks at Longleat and Stourhead have had a significant influence on the settlement pattern, as well as the physical appearance of the landscape as a whole.

Settlement and Built Character

Significant parts of the *Penselwood-Longleat Hills* remain unsettled, reflecting both the gradient and the dominance of forestry. However, pockets of dense development occur along the minor lanes that access the hills, for example around Penselwood/Zeals and Crockerton, and around Stourhead and Longleat. The historic houses, their immediate gardens and parkland surrounds, together with estate woodland and farmland make a very positive contribution to the character and quality of the landscape. Their influence extends well beyond the strict confines of the estates. There are also a handful of hamlets, such as Gasper and Gare Hill, often comprising little more than a row of houses and a telephone box. Typical building materials are red brick and limestone with clay tile roofs.

Historic Environment

The historic character of the present landscape is largely influenced by the large country estates and their landscaped parkland. The key visible historic components are:

- The series of late prehistoric earthwork enclosure and hillforts along the Greensand scarp, mirrored by a series of castles in the medieval and post-medieval periods.
- Extensive landscaped parks surrounding large country houses, at Longleat and Stourhead.

- Post-medieval to modern coniferous plantations, and estate farmland, with a low level of settlement.

EVALUATION

Strength of Character

This is a landscape of **strong** character as a result of its distinct and recognisable pattern of elements - the rounded knolls, ancient woodland and designed parkland landscapes. It is an instantly recognisable landscape that is popular for recreation and forms a contrast to the adjacent open chalk landscapes.

Current Condition

The condition of the landscape is perceived to be **good**. Overall the landscape possesses a high degree of intactness with good survival of historic earthwork features, early inclosure patterns and ancient broadleaved woodland. There are few areas of underused land and built features are in a good state of repair. The estates are well managed and this has an influence on the condition of the wider landscape. However, the replanting of native woodlands by blocks of conifers has eroded the ecological condition of some of the native woodlands.

Past and Present Change

- The principle issues affecting the Penselwood-Longleat Hills in the past have related to forestry, the loss of ancient woodland and the landscape impacts of felling and replanting large areas.
- Large numbers of visitors have exerted pressures on the landscape, bringing traffic and requirement of services, facilities and accommodation. The presence of visitor traffic has resulted in road improvements including widening, signage, and lighting.
- There has been a gradual decline in traditional woodland management techniques as skills have been lost and forestry has concentrated on coniferous species.
- Invasion of exotic species from parkland landscapes into the native woodlands is evident in some areas.
- Wetland habitats on valley floors have been lost in the past.

Possible Future Trends

The main land uses in this area are commercial forestry and tourism. Although forestry has affected the landscape in the past and felling of large coupes will continue, there is unlikely to be further change in landscape condition as a result of such operations. If anything, changes are likely to be positive with the planting of more native species and softening edges of plantations. There are currently issues affecting tourism across the whole of the UK. The future of tourism is difficult to predict at this stage.

The increasing professionalisation of livestock farming may affect the small number of pastoral areas between the woodland. There may be a limited availability of livestock to graze marginal land (often of high environmental value).

There is likely to be further pressure for new built development because of the area's proximity to local towns such as Warminster, Frome and Wincanton.

Overall, future trends imply that landscape condition is likely to be **stable** in this area.

Management Objective

The overall management objective should be to conserve the woodland, parkland and the mosaic of pastures and meadows that characterise the landscape. Woodland conservation and management is key in this wooded landscape.

- Reduce impact of forestry operations by encouraging sensitive forestry practice, for example mixing different species and felling small coupes.
- Consider restoring traditional management techniques, such as coppicing to encourage a diverse age structure and a rich ground flora.
- Encourage woodland management of the remaining deciduous woodlands to check invasion of exotic species and encourage a healthy new generation of woodland trees.
- Encourage interest in, and marketing of, local wood products.
- Resist urbanisation of the country lanes or excessive signage that detracts from the rural character of the area. Consider the use of signage that fits with the rural character of the landscape.
- Ensure that new development does not affect the character of hamlets and villages and that it does not impinge upon the setting of Stourhead and Longleat.
- Monitor the effects of incremental, small scale change in the built environment. Local authorities can minimise the impacts of incremental change by providing suitable design guidance and encouraging applicants to enter into discussions at an early stage in the preparation of their proposals.
- Conserve and protect the remnant semi-natural habitats including the wetland habitats on the valley floor and isolated areas of hay meadow. Opportunities to restore and extend these rare habitats should be considered.
- Encourage management of parkland and designed landscapes that are characteristic of the area. Consider targeting these for funding such as Heritage Lottery Grant funding.
- Promote sustainable management of recreation particularly in relation to the proposed Open Country designation at Cley Hill.