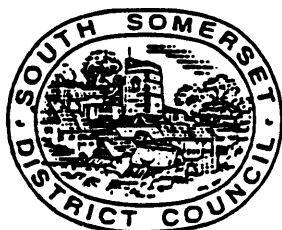


THE LANDSCAPE OF SOUTH SOMERSET

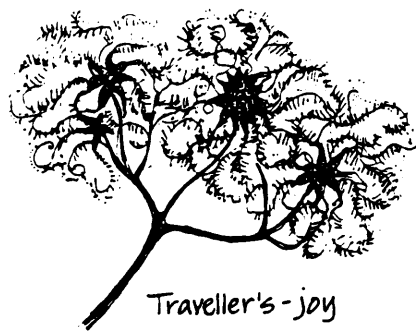


South Somerset District Council
Development Services Department

Planning Environment Unit

THE LANDSCAPE OF SOUTH SOMERSET

**A LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT
OF THE SCENERY OF SOUTH SOMERSET**



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on the geology and soils of South Somerset

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A LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT OF SOUTH SOMERSET

INTRODUCTION

The Countryside and Rural Issues

The countryside is an important and topical local issue. For centuries people took the English countryside for granted. To the townspeople it was a wild and inhospitable place, peopled by almost a different race. To the countryperson it was the backdrop to everyday life - the natural cycle to which the constant effort to provide food, shelter and human fulfilment was inextricably linked.

Nowadays people have different views. To country people the landscape is still a place of work, and rural housing, transport and social life have their own unique problems. But to the town and city dwellers who make up the majority of our population the countryside has taken on a new role. Although to many people the countryside is unfamiliar and threatening, many others have developed a passionate commitment to it as a place of recreation, education and spiritual regeneration.

Alongside this shift of public attitude have come government changes. Agriculture throughout Europe is a contentious political issue, whilst planning controls, through designations and policies are seeking to conserve the character of the countryside in the face of tremendous social economic and environmental pressures.

A local authority is involved in these issues in a number of ways. Firstly, as a representative body in a democratic society, a district council needs to have a thorough knowledge and understanding of the countryside within its care. Secondly in preparing development plans a local planning authority will wish to consider identifying areas for special treatment by means of specific policies relevant to the area's character. Thirdly, when considering planning applications or other development proposals the district will need to define what gives an area its special character so that the impact of the development being considered can be properly assessed. Finally a local authority makes a number of direct investment decisions in the countryside - for instance with regard to landscape conservation grants for tourist facilities - and these decisions will involve consideration of the quality of a particular piece of land, whether in a regional or local context.

Landscape Assessment

All these activities imply the need to know more about people's reaction to the countryside. Although this reaction is complex, a large part of it depends on how people perceive the beauty of the landscape. Perception itself is not simply a matter of seeing with the eye. As was noted by the government inspector at a recent inquiry into a proposed Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty:-

"the feel of the wind, the warmth of the sun, the scent of flowers, the glare of snow or a sudden break in low scudding cloud, all contribute to the perception of landscape."

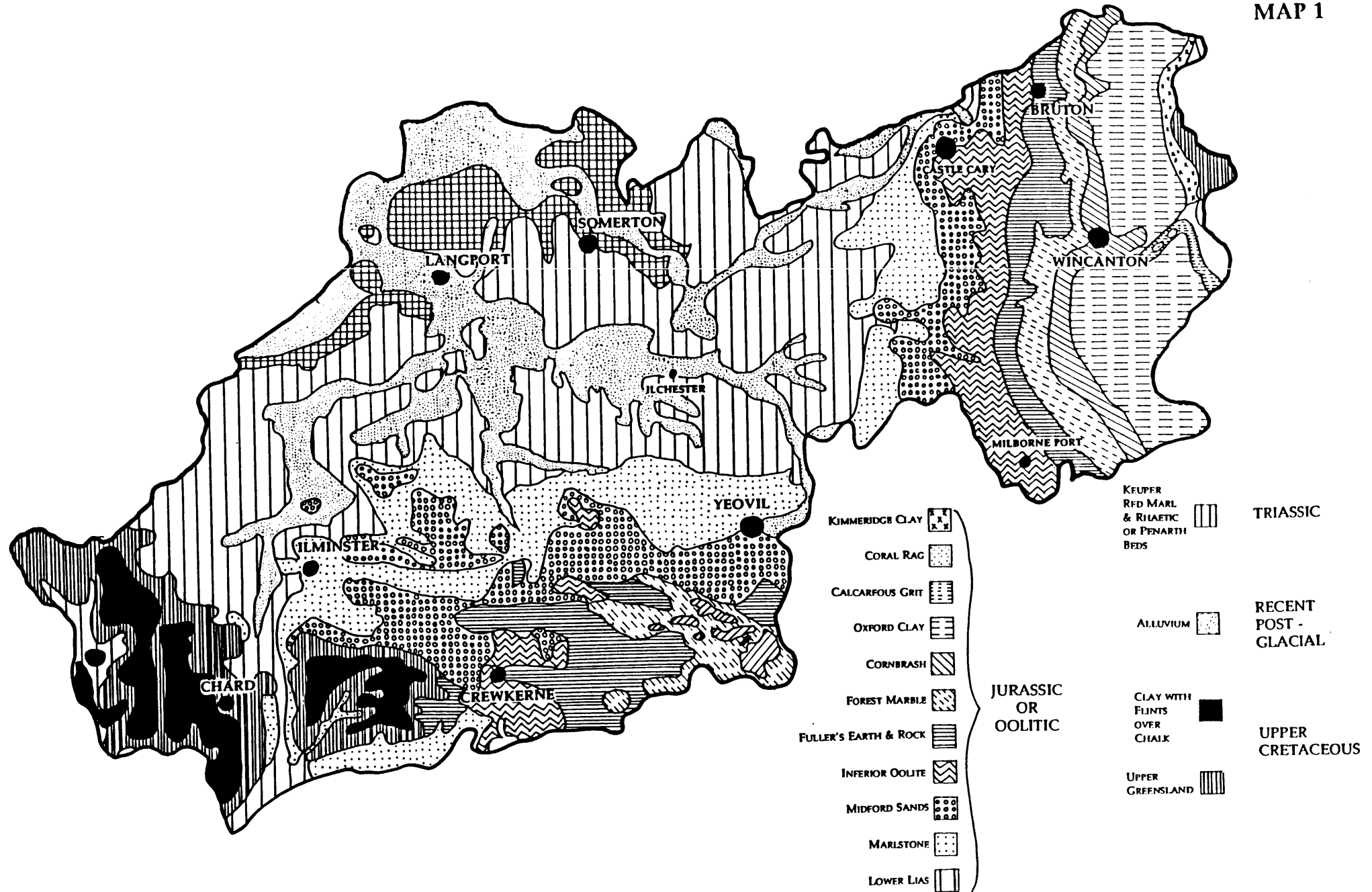
Neither is natural beauty confined to such aesthetic or sensual elements. Response to the landscape depends also on human and personal values such as may be evidenced by old earthworks and landscaped parklands which give us a link with our past and a better understanding of our place in the world and in time. Another vital factor in people's response to the countryside around them is their awareness of wildlife - flora and fauna. Together with other physical characteristics such as geology, soil, relief, land use and vegetation, the "natural world" can provide a refreshing and stimulating antidote to the pressures of modern life.

Evaluating the way in which all these separate components combine to create the huge variety of landscapes in Britain and what gives each of these its unique sense of place and local

South Somerset

Simplified Geology

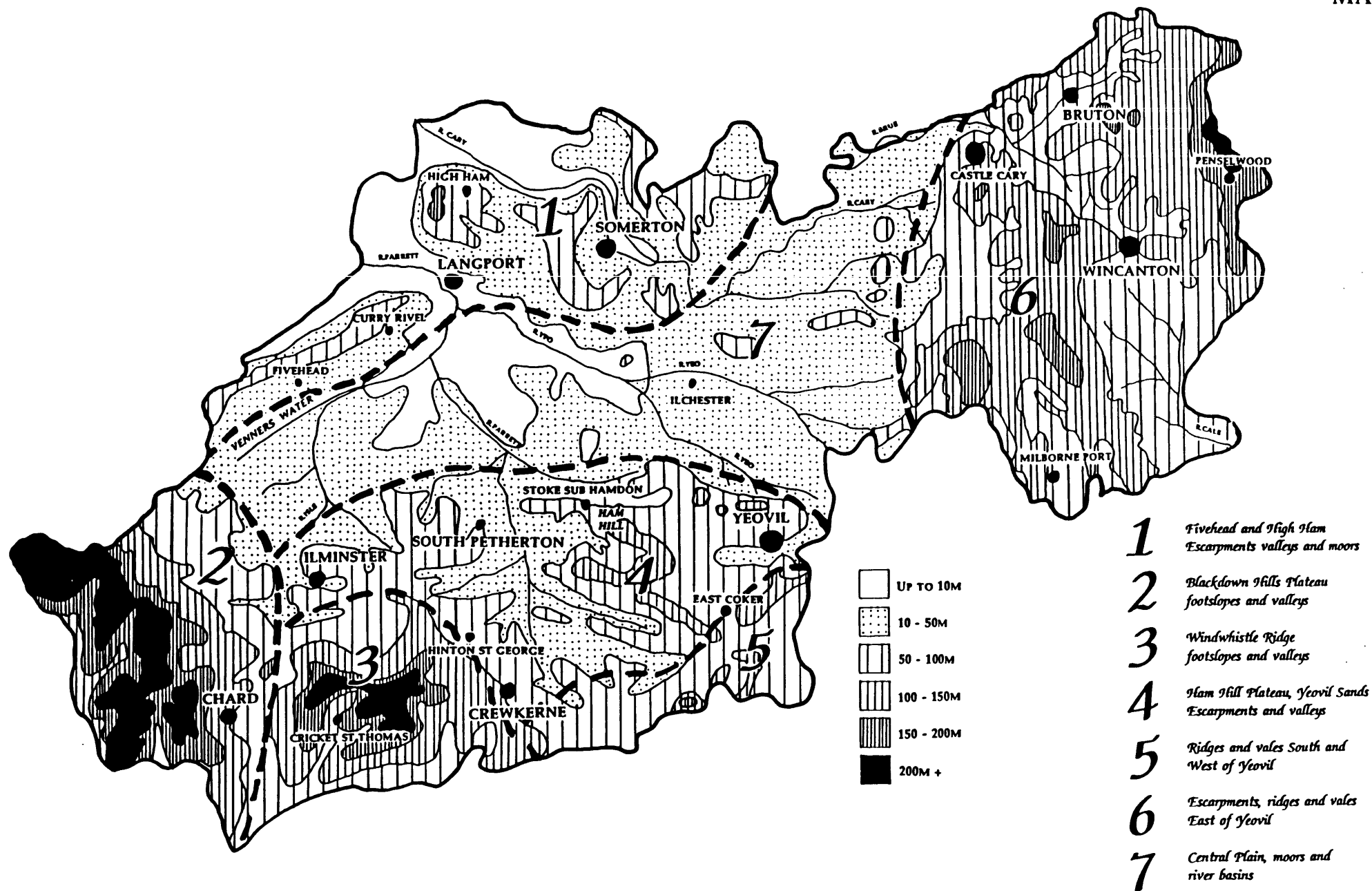
MAP 1



South Somerset

Visual Character Regions

MAP 2



distinctiveness, is the essence of landscape assessment.

In carrying out its own landscape assessment of South Somerset, the District Council is stating its commitment to the things that make South Somerset unique; not so that the landscape can be fossilized - this never has been and never will be possible - but so that the decisions it makes which affect the countryside and the character of the landscape are informed decisions, made with due regard to their effect on the landscape we will pass on to future generations.

The South Somerset Landscape

The "southern arc" of South Somerset is composed mainly of the Jurassic clays, sands and limestones (MAP 1 - page 7). These rocks create a landform of wide clay vales or rolling lowland occasionally broken up by outcrops of limestone which have been extensively quarried to give the buildings such distinctive local character. The central lowlands were once extensive marshes over which peat developed. Now drained, they form the well-loved peat moors grazing lands with their characteristic rectilinear drainage pattern. South-east Somerset which abuts Wiltshire and Dorset is mainly oolitic limestones which form a geological formation reaching as far as the Cotswolds and southwards to Crewkerne. Outcrops at Ham Hill and Castle Cary have been quarried for building stone and again have made a major contribution to the local distinctiveness of the Districts villages and towns.

The size of the District (370 sq. miles) requires the area to be broken up into regions (MAP 2 - page 8). These will be recognisable and reasonably distinct units based on topography and geology. Each unit will be described in some detail with reference to settlement, land-use, natural history and any sub-units of landscape type such as river valleys, scarp and dip slopes and so on. Human perceptions are also vital in assessments and the response of Parish Councils to a questionnaire (Appendices) and comments by local writers and commentators - such as Havinden (1981) will be incorporated.

The subdivision of the District is as follows:-

1. FIVEHEAD AND HIGH HAM ESCARPMENTS, VALLEYS AND MOORS.
2. BLACKDOWN HILLS PLATEAU ESCARPMENT FOOTSLOPES AND VALLEYS.
3. WINDWHISTLE RIDGE FOOTSLOPES AND VALLEYS
4. HAM HILL PLATEAU, YEOVIL SANDS ESCARPMENTS AND VALLEYS.
5. RIDGES AND VALES SOUTH AND WEST OF YEOVIL
6. ESCARPMENTS, RIDGES AND VALES EAST OF YEOVIL.
7. CENTRAL PLAIN, MOORS AND RIVER BASINS.

Briefly the justification for this sub-division is as follows:

1. Fivehead and High Ham Escarpments, Valleys and Moors.

Forming the northern "rim" of the District, these distinctive geological formations consist of dramatic wooded scarps contrasting vividly with the flat moors to the north. This woodland/wetland combination is particularly noted for its ecological value.

2. Blackdown Hills Plateau, Escarpment Footslopes and Valleys

This area now designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) forms a distinctive outcrop of harder rocks in the extreme western part of the District. The visual quality is particularly high and quite varied. There are open arable fields on the plateau top contrasting with steep slopes and heavily wooded intimate valleys. The area has great archaeological and historic interest and is an oasis for wildlife.

3. Windwhistle Ridge, Foothills and Valleys

This is a block of upland lying between Chard and Crewkerne north of the River Axe forming escarpments, gentle slopes and picturesque coombes, particularly at Cricket St. Thomas and west of Crewkerne.

4. Ham Hill Plateau, Yeovil Sands Escarpments and Valleys

This is perhaps the least homogeneous of the visual character zones with very complex geology and some distinctive landforms. These include the ridges of Hinton St George and the Ham Hill plateau. This area is the subject of considerable development pressures being close to Yeovil. In places the scenic quality is very high and there are a number of ancient monuments and sites of ecological value.

5. Ridges and Vales South and West of Yeovil

This is a succession of east - west clay vales separated by low rolling ridges formed from the Forest Marble limestone. In character it is true limestone country reflected in its flora and in the many fine thatched cottages in the region. The countryside becomes particularly wooded and wild in the frontier zone abutting Dorset.

6. Escarpments, Ridges and Vales East of Yeovil

East of the River Yeo there is a distinctive series of north-south landforms resulting from a succession of hard and soft rocks. These rocks are part of a much larger feature which extends as far as the Cotswolds. The highest scarp at Penselwood forms the eastern "book-end" to the District matching the Blackdowns in the west, and forming part of the West Wiltshire and Cranborne Chase Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Again, ecological and archaeological sites abound.

7. Central Plain, Moors and River Basins

The five hill areas described above enclose a great inland basin formed by the rivers Brue, Isle, Parrett, Yeo and Cary, which flow across this flat expanse and deposit alluvium washed down from the hills. The scenery is surprisingly varied with many subtleties dictated by land-cover e.g. orchards, arable crops, pasture and woodlands. The main semi-natural features are the open wooded river corridors, remnant ancient woodland and ancient hedgerows.

It will also be necessary to divide these seven regions into sub-units based on geological and other characteristics such as land-use or land-cover e.g. the moors. It is argued, however, that usually the landform and topography influences the options available for human land-use although subsequent modification of soils by drainage, fertilisers and ploughing may give the area characteristic differences masking this underlying geology.

Within these seven units view points were selected, and, based on the Countryside Commission model a checklist was devised to record the impressions of the landscape, aspects such as landform, land-cover, landscape elements and features, notable habitats and species and subjective reactions to the landscape. A sample checklist is located in the Appendices. Panoramic photographic records were taken at each visual checkpoint and annotated in the office.

VISUAL CHARACTER REGION 1

The Fivehead and High Ham Escarpments, Valleys and Moors.

Introduction

This area lies on the northern "edge" of the District (MAP 3, page 12, its east-west alignment of rock formations and ridges creating a rim like effect. The region includes the parishes of Curry Mallett, Fivehead, part of Curry Rivel, Drayton, Huish Episcopi/Langport, Aller, High Ham, Pitney, Somerton, part of Kingsdon, Compton Dundon, Charlton Mackrell, Kingweston, Barton St David, and Keinton Mandeville.

The geology dates from the Triassic period which are the oldest rocks of the district. Rhaetic stones are exposed as low scarps overlying the red Keuper Marls or Mercia Mudstones, and are often distinctly red in colour. They form footslopes or isolated hills on the moors, such as Lollover Hill.

To the north of Somerton the hills are geologically part of the Poldens which extend north-westwards towards Bridgwater Bay.

Between Kingsdon and Fivehead there is an immense dipslope which falls gently southwards into the central plain and river valleys of the Isle and Yeo. This landform, which consists of Lower Lias rocks of the Jurassic period, is penetrated by the rivers Parrett and Cary which create narrow valleys at the point where they flow through to the northern moors. These valleys are flat bottomed and have large areas of alluvial deposits.

Settlement and Land-use.

The settlement pattern of this region is quite distinctive, with villages located so as to benefit from the drier soils of the dipslope and the seasonally rich grazing pastures of the wetlands to the north and south. Woodland resources were also plentiful and there is evidence of coppicing in the ancient woodland on the steeper scarp faces.

Where the woodland has been cleared ancient hedges form boundaries to irregular shaped fields, often terraced and with distinctive strip lynchets, as at Sedgemoor Hill, High Ham.

The Lower Lias dipslope is predominantly arable with large fields and few hedges or trees.

The Keuper Marl footslopes are better drained and grow cereal and silage for the many mixed farming or dairy units which string out along the lanes and tracks following the "leading edge" of the hills. Some of these farms have ancient origins and occupy the site of Roman Villas such as at Park, Pitney. Low hedges on these footslopes distinctively give way to rhynes on the moor as the method of enclosure.

The moors consist of peaty, open, waterlogged soils where permanent pasture is grazed by cattle or traditionally cropped for hay. Withy growing in the Oath area is local and traditional and represents the remains of a once-flourishing industry. Orchards are often a feature on the slopes of the hills as at Wearne, Huish Episcopi and Dundon. Some commercial forestry takes place on the Somerton Hills at Great Breach Wood.

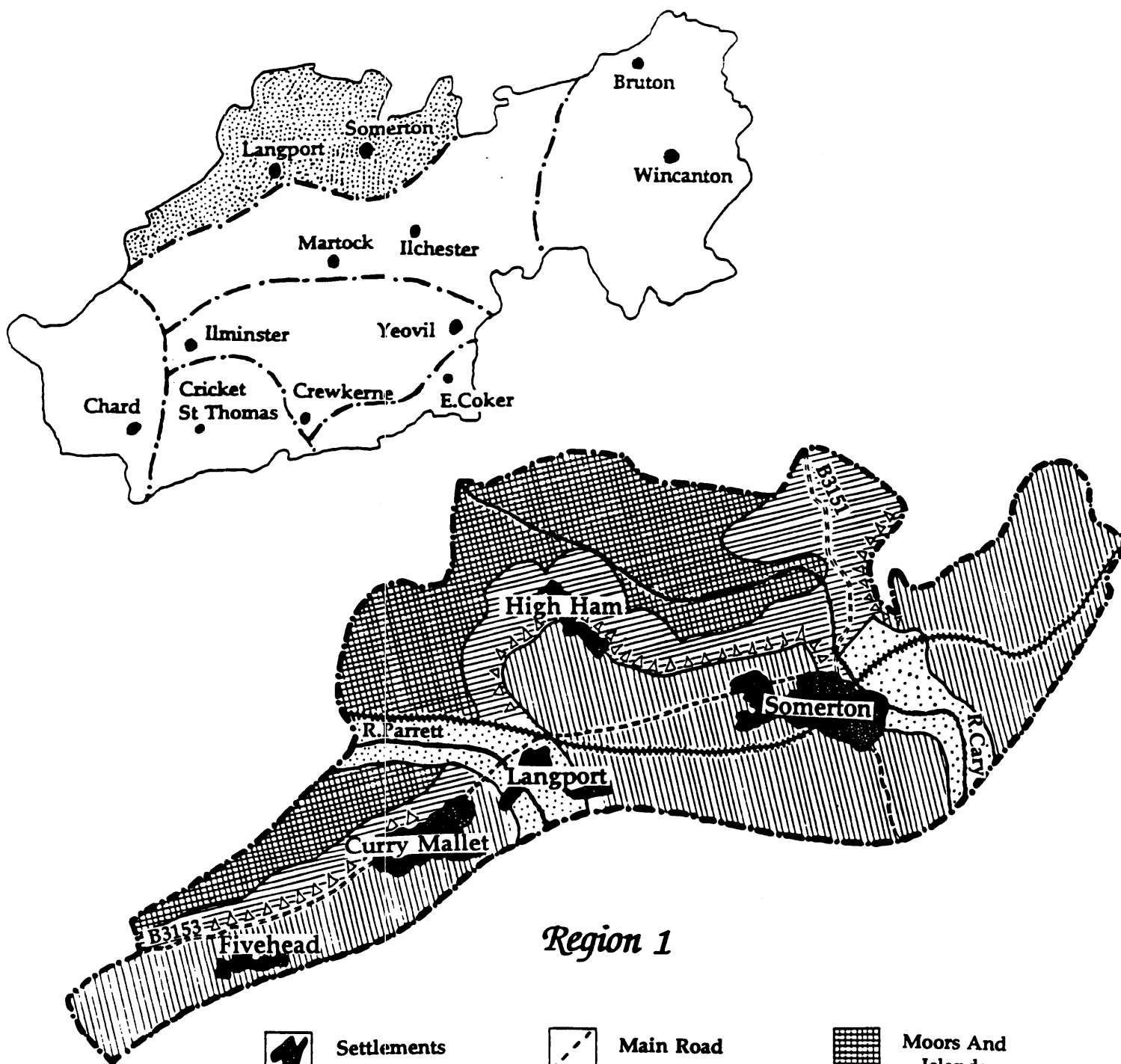
Wildlife

This area of the District is acknowledged to be one of the richest for wildlife sites and has a number of nature reserves and Sites of Special Scientific Interest. The Langport and Somerton Local Plan identifies over a hundred sites of County or national importance. At Aller Wood (Fig.1) and Swell Wood on the escarpment ancient woodland SSSIs overlook wet meadowland SSSIs at West Sedgemoor and South Lake Moor. There are also surviving areas of unimproved "downland", such as Bowdens, which have rich communities of wildflowers and grasses.

Fivehead and High Ham Escarpments

Valleys and Moors

MAP 3



Hedges cross the contours and provide corridors to and from the moors and escarpment woods. This diversity of habitat provides particularly valuable conditions for wildlife, particularly birds and plants.

To the south and east the Lias dip slope has a few refuges for calcareous-loving plant communities particularly on minor road verges. There is a very unusual "arable weed" SSSI at Fivehead, but much of the area is fairly indistinctive farmland.

Landscape Character

Examined in more detail it is possible to distinguish six character zones. Sometimes character zones merge imperceptibly one into another, but there are distinguishing features such as landform or vegetation which allow distinctions to be recognised.

The character zones are:

- (1) The Moors and islands
- (2) Moor fringe
- (3) Woody escarpment
- (4) Clay dipslope
- (5) River corridors and alluvial plain
- (6) Settlements

(1) THE MOORS AND ISLANDS

This landscape is also seen in the central plain and river basins (Area 7). In this north and western region however it is associated with the rivers Cary and Parrett and is part of the larger area known as the Somerset levels and moors.

This landscape has great qualities which has inspired writers and artists;

"the strange landscape of the Somerset Levels; a vast reclaimed swamp, where the brilliant emerald green pastures are separated not by hedges or walls, but by a huge network of irrigation ditches..... which, when caught by the setting sun, glistens a brilliant silver or gold; so that the whole basin..... looks like a huge green fishing-net with its translucent ribs shimmering and glistening....." Havinden (1981)

Painters such as Philip Jackson, and photographers such as Patrick Sutherland and Julian Comrie (see references) have celebrated the unique atmosphere of this area, highlighting the contrast between the vast open spaces and the detail of flower-filled meadows, willow pollards and lush sedge-fringed rhynes.

Detailed analysis of this landscape has already been carried out by landscape consultants on behalf of the Ministry of Agriculture (MAFF 1989) as part of the Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) Monitoring Programme.

The MAFF monitoring report divides the moor into six types:

Open Moor
Semi-Open Moor
Bushy Moor
Domesticated Moor
Hillocks
Disturbed Moor.

Bushy moor and disturbed moor are absent from this District.

Open Moor

Substantial areas of open moor exist and these areas contrast markedly with the hedged landscape of the moor fringe. This can be clearly seen at Aller Moor (Fig.1).

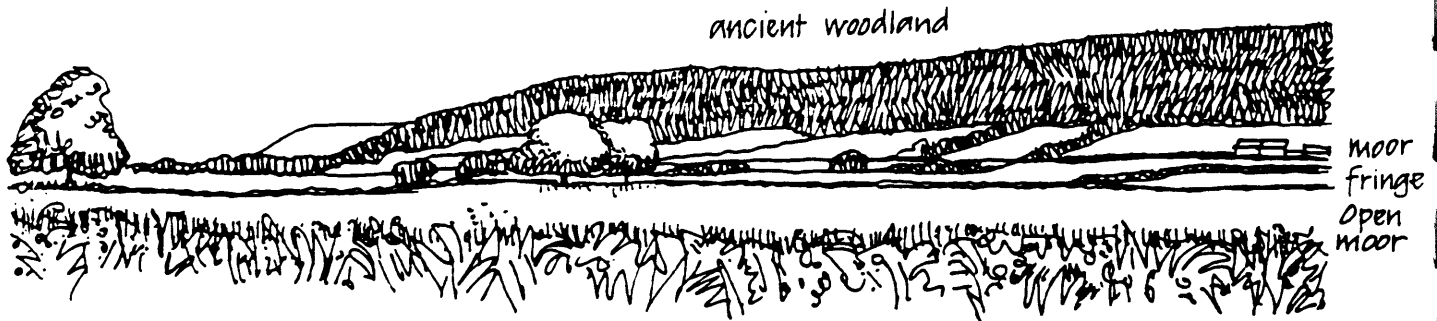


Fig.1. Aller Moors and wood

Open moor has the following key characteristics:

"An overall pattern and wetness created by high water tables, winter flooding and the extensive regular rectilinear network of grassy droves and rhynes as "wet fences" with their associated herb-rich vegetation.

"An expansive, visually homogeneous open naturalness created by extensive areas of low-intensity grassland and herb-rich pasture with a lack of scrub, woodland or fencing. Traditionally planting restricted to occasional lines of regularly pollarded willows in key places, and isolated field junction plantings.

"An isolation and naturalness created by a lack of buildings and artifacts or modern automotive appearances in management."

Open moor is widespread on Somerton Moor, substantial areas of West Sedgemoor (Fivehead and Curry Rivel parishes), Aller Moor and North Moor.

Semi-Open Moor

The next most common type is semi-open moor and marks a gentle transition from open moor. This includes much of Kings Sedgemoor north of High Ham.

Semi-open moor like open moor is spacious, large scale, predominantly open and flat grassland. There is, however, a semi-enclosing feeling imparted by a pattern of shelter-belts, willows and hawthorn bushes:

"An overall pattern and wetness created by high water tables and the extensive regular rectilinear network of wet rhynes.

"A spacious but patterned and punctuated openness created by grass fields with lines of pollarded willows and isolated groups and lines of planting picking out parts of the field boundaries.

"A naturalness due to herb-rich vegetation and grass, wet rhynes and the general lack of buildings and artifacts."

Domesticated Moor

Domesticated moor is not well-represented in this District. It abuts the moor-fringe landscape character zone located between Aller and Beer, with small areas at Redlands Compton Dundon and Oath, Huish Episcopi. This landscape is strongly related to soil type and to improved drainage which introduces more domestic features such as orchards. Boundaries are sometimes hedges combined with rhynes. Arable crops break up the dominance of pasture and meadow land.

"Rectilinear patterns created by the small-scale grass fields surrounded by open rhynes and low hedges, in association with pollarded willows.

"A spacious and managed domesticated character due to the active management of hedges, small woods and traditional orchards in association with farms, isolated traditional buildings and settlement.

"A relative isolation due to the lack of artifacts and new building outside the traditional building patterns of settlements and farmsteads."

Domesticated moor, makes a gentle transition from adjacent types. An abrupt transition is found only when the change in type directly responds to changes in landform.

Hillocks

Hillocks are knolls of higher land visually distinct from the level ground of the moors. They are often settled by quite old farmsteads with orchards and arable fields. Oath Hill is formed from the red Mercia Mudstones and has geological links with the escarpment. Other hillocks are distinctive landmarks such as that occupied by Aller Church and Manor. The following characteristics define hillocks:

"A vertical contrast exaggerated by woodland, hedges running up slopes through grass fields and specific historic artifacts on the summits.

"A sense of hillocks being part of the Moors landscape created by their managed grassland character and their historic and social focus within the surrounding low-lying land."

The transitions between hillocks, and adjacent moorland types is abrupt, due to the change of slope.

The qualities of the moorland scenery are in general well-appreciated by the residents of the area. Views across the moors from prominent landmarks such as Lollover Hill, Dundon Beacon and Turn Hill are particularly mentioned by the Parish Councils.

(2) THE MOOR FRINGE

This landscape zone lies between the moor and the steeper wooded slopes of the escarpment. The farms here benefit from the extensive grazing and lush grass of the moor as well as the drier ploughable soils of the hill footslopes. Hedges are usually species-rich and fields are sometimes long and thin emphasising the flow of the slope (Fig.2). These are a result of reclamation from the wooded slopes in one direction and from waterlogged marsh and swamp in the other. Ancient tracks and roads fringe the steep escarpment and link a thin ribbon of farmsteads and cottages (Fig.1). This linear roadside settlement is quite common in South Somerset. A good example is in the Henley area where there are many small farms separated by orchards and sheep-grazed paddocks.

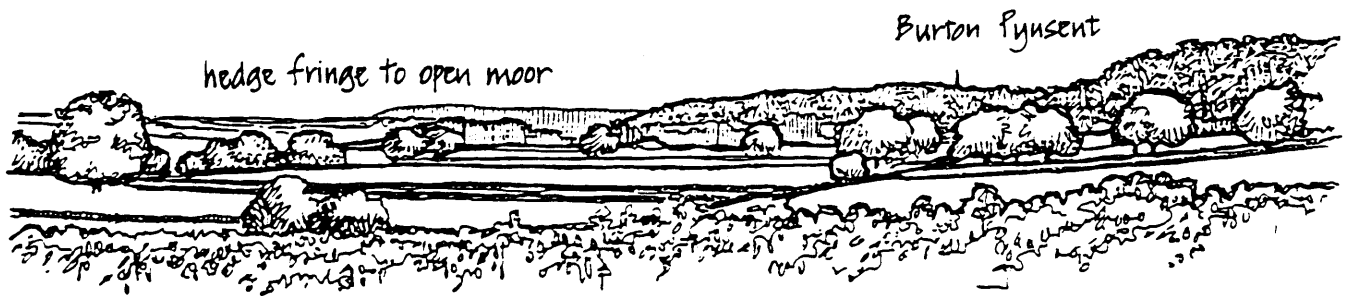


Fig. 2. Moor fringe Burton Pynsent

Hedge-trees are usually oak or ash, the latter often pollarded - a practice well represented in the Henley area. Willows, often old pollards, are more common on the wetter land. Overall there is great rural charm in this small-scale domestic landscape which contrasts strongly with the vast unpopulated expanses of the moor and the enclosed secrecy of the wooded scarps.

(3) THE ESCARPMENTS.

The wooded escarpments provide the framework for the lowlands to the north and east rising dramatically from these moors which are almost at sea level (Figs. 1 and 2). Collinson (1791) describes the Somerton Hills in fine old prose:

"extending four miles northwards, bears conspicuous traits of its having formed in some very early period an bold and rocky boundary to the sea, being remarkably steep, strongly indented and in some parts fretted with deep concavities"

and describing the ridge north of Curry Rivel:

"the north side of this parish is a bold range of hills, which rises with a steep accent about four hundred feet from West Sedgemoor the slope being finely waved, indented and clothed with beautiful hanging woods, these woods alternately swell into bold projections and recede into fine hollows forming a grand profile when viewed from the east or west".

The beauty of these low wooded hills is well described and together with the wetlands forms one of the most balanced landscapes in Britain. It is best appreciated from deep within the moor, perhaps crossing West Sedgemoor by rail near Langport. The towers at Burton Pynsent and the Hood Monument help to orientate the traveller. (Fig.2)

There are a few outlying hills fringing the escarpments - notably Dundon Beacon (an iron age hillfort), Lollover Hill and the Littleton Hills near Compton Dundon.

The woodland is mainly broadleaved oak and ash with hazel coppice. Its ancient origin is apparent from the rich floral carpet of wood anemone, violet, bluebell, yellow archangel and many species of orchid. Characteristic of woodland and ancient hedge is stinking iris which like the clematis favours lime soils. The grey old mans beard is characteristic particularly festooning the upper branches and canopy of trees in the Somerton area. Spindle is a hedgerow and underwood shrub characteristic of this area, its distinctive pink orange fruits are a common hedgerow sight in winter when the mechanical flail has not been over zealous.

The conifer plantations of the 1950s and 60s have not been very successful. The spruce in particular has become chlorotic and slow growing.

Some hilltops have of course been cleared of woodland leaving irregular shaped fields sometimes with overgrown hawthorn hedges. In places these marginal areas are sheep-grazed and herb-rich, calcareous grassland can be still found supporting lime-loving plants such as yellowwort and pyramidal orchid. These pastures are often pimpled with ant-hills and can be rich in butterfly colonies such as Marbled White, Meadow Brown and Common Blue. Buzzards are a familiar sight soaring on the thermals above the escarpment watching for unsuspecting rabbits. The contrast between the pale yellow/green unfertilised surround of these sheep pastures and the bright greens of the improved grasslands of the moor-fringe is quite marked.

The soil is dry, stony and thin and in some places slumping has exposed dramatic red and grey banded rocks. Gilling Down near Compton Dundon is a good example.

(4) LIAS CLAY DIP-SLOPE

Viewed from the Blackdown Hills near Neroche Castle the scale of this immense geological feature is immediately apparent. Extending some ten miles from Curry Mallett/Fivehead to east of Somerton, the angle of the slope is emphasised by the north-south direction of the cross-with slope hedges and lanes.

The contrast between the character of the area and the northern moors and wooded escarpment is marked. There is less homogeneity in this landscape and the impression is of pockets of high quality "designed" landscape often closely associated with the numerous settlements in the area. Midelney Place, Curry Rivel/Drayton is typical. Between these high-spots there are some quite mundane arable landscapes, though there are areas where traditional mixed farms or small hedged fields remain.

Many hedges have been removed and those that remain are low, gappy and in a state of decay. Hedge trees, predominantly ash, are infrequent and suffer from die-back. Other trees are only associated with settlements. The effect of Dutch Elm Disease is all too evident having increased the likelihood of hedge removal. There are, however some well managed and distinctive hedge patterns to be found for instance at Kingsdon Hill, south of Somerton in the vicinity of the telecommunication masts and in the Drayton area. Here the elm is making a dramatic comeback.

Woodland so dominating on the scarp to the north makes less impression to the south except at High Ham and Kingweston. Small woods, mainly isolated often unmanaged plantations are at Highbrooks, Somerton and at Long Sutton and Drayton.

Throughout the area there is a network of country lanes these often intersecting at crossroads. Hedges are species-rich, particularly with viburnum, spindle and wild privet. Verges contain remnant herb-rich swards of agrimony, cowslip, knapweed and stinking iris. The hedge flora in the Fivehead area is particularly good.

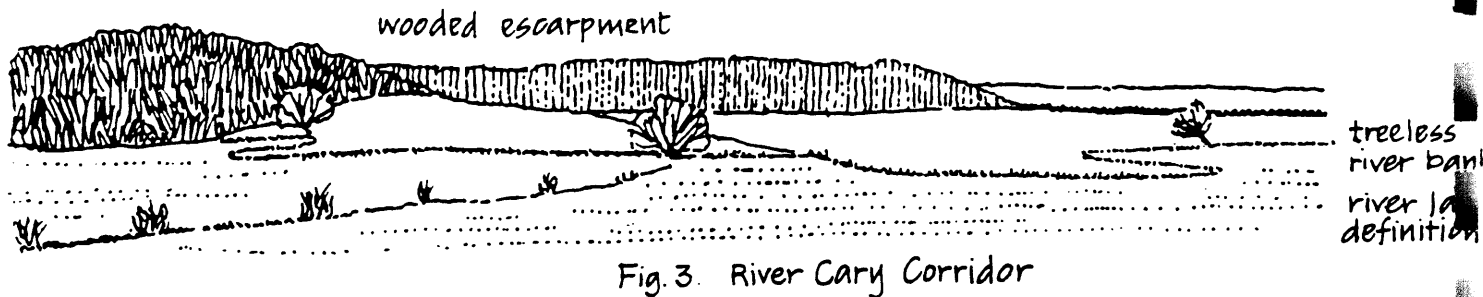
Midelney Manor is a good example of a designed landscape. The parkland and specimen trees are particularly attractive from the low lying land to the south. Remnants of similar parkland landscapes survive at Kingweston and Kingsdon, though considerable replanting would be necessary to restore their historic character.

(5) RIVER CORRIDORS

The Lower Lias escarpment is breached by the River Parrett at Langport and the Cary at Somerton. There is also a narrow valley between High Ham and Pitney.

The Cary flows across the eastern clay vale from its source in the Inferior Oolite limestone hills at Castle Cary. Not a particularly beautiful river it is relatively tree-less and it has been

"tamed", straightened and deepened. Cultivation takes place right up to its flood bank. The Cary valley from Kingsdon past Somerton is mainly arable with some enclaves of pasture. The landscape of the valley floor is virtually treeless. Hedges have been removed or flailed low in stark contrast to the wilder texture of the wooded scarps and the valley. (Fig.3)



North of Somerton there is a dramatic view across the Cary Valley to Compton Beacon. Here there are distinct hints of domesticated peat moor scenery with rectangular field-patterns and rows of pollarded willows. Railway engineering dominates the Cary valley at Somerton and the short viaduct is a particular landmark.

The River Parrett is a well-fed river which flows across the central plain from its source in the Dorset borderlands breaching the lower lias at Langport. Its riverside scenery is characterised by willows and grazing pasture and it forms an attractive setting to Langport. The river flows slowly and deeply in great curves out onto the moors where it is tamed by great banks, locks and sluices. Glimpses of this silvery river can be seen from the surrounding escarpments. The alluvial flood-plain stretches either side and sometimes in winter the river temporarily dominates the landscape with extensive flooding.

The Low Ham gap is a north-south valley which is occupied by an insignificant water course but which forms a distinctive landscape feature. Beginning at Wagg Drove (Huish Episcopi), the landscape is small scale with rectilinear meadows, willow lined rhynes and orchards. Towards High Ham the valley opens out and has many of the characteristics of domesticated moor.

(6) THE SETTLEMENTS

A common unifying element in all the settlements of this visual character region is the use of the blue or white lias stone for building. This stone originates mainly from Keinton Mandeville where it is used not just for the buildings but in the construction of unusual slab-stone walling. Keinton itself is a large village with a distinctive pattern of walled orchard plots on the western side of the village.

Many of the villages in this area have a significant number of specimen trees which can often be seen from a distance. Curry Rivel has an impressive number of trees, best seen from the south at Wiltown and from the east at Midelney Place and Water Street. Kingsdon and Kingweston have parkland settings and east Somerton is well-wooded at Millands, Lower Somerton and Somerton Erleigh. Langport has a magnificent group of specimen trees at the Hill and Hurds Hill.

Orchards remain a vital element of the setting of many villages, such as Pitney and Keinton Mandeville, but many traditional orchards have been removed for agriculture or development, for instance Keinton Mandeville has only 30% of its orchards present in 1930. (See Appendix).

Change in the Landscape

The essential character of this landscape region is the wooded escarpment and its visual and ecological relationship with the moors, the dipslope and the river valleys. In some places the relationship is strong - in others it is being gradually eroded. Rough grazing land and scrub on the escarpment is being improved to provide less distinctive pasture land. Motorcycle scrambling is scarring several hillsides in the Somerton and Compton Dundon area.

The Moors themselves remain a unique landscape where change has been slowed through the Ministry of Agriculture's introduction of the Environmentally Sensitive Area Scheme (ESA) in which farmers are given payments to continue to farm in traditional ways foregoing improvements in productivity. The continuing problem of falling water levels is also now being addressed through the ESA system.

On the arable lands of the dip-slope it is the hedge which provide the main landscape element in this relatively tree-less landscape. In the Cary valley and the lower lias scarp, particularly traditional management of hedgerows has almost disappeared and the quality of the hedge and its value for wildlife are suffering as a result. This is particularly regrettable in the case of roadside hedges, which are often the oldest hedges in the landscape and which, together with the verge, form wildlife corridors and visual links between the river valleys and the escarpment woodlands.

Woodlands throughout the British Isles suffer from lack of management, and the woodlands here would benefit greatly from thinning, or re-stocking and in some cases from amalgamation to form larger blocks of woodland with more visual and ecological impact. There is some replanting taking place, for instance at Knole Hill and Knole Knap, but this is generally insufficient to make up for the continuing loss of trees due to drought, disease and destruction of hedgerow saplings.

Pollarded willows are a distinctive landscape feature which also require regular maintenance. All too often they are allowed to grow top heavy and vulnerable to high winds. The mill stream east of Knole is an attractive landscape feature which should be preserved in this way.

Farm buildings are a major feature in the landscape and where tree cover is low they can appear too conspicuous (Fig.4), and poorly related to their surroundings. The number of new farm dwellings is particularly noticeable around Pitney, where a number of village farms have relocated out of villages and their redundant buildings within the villages converted or redeveloped.

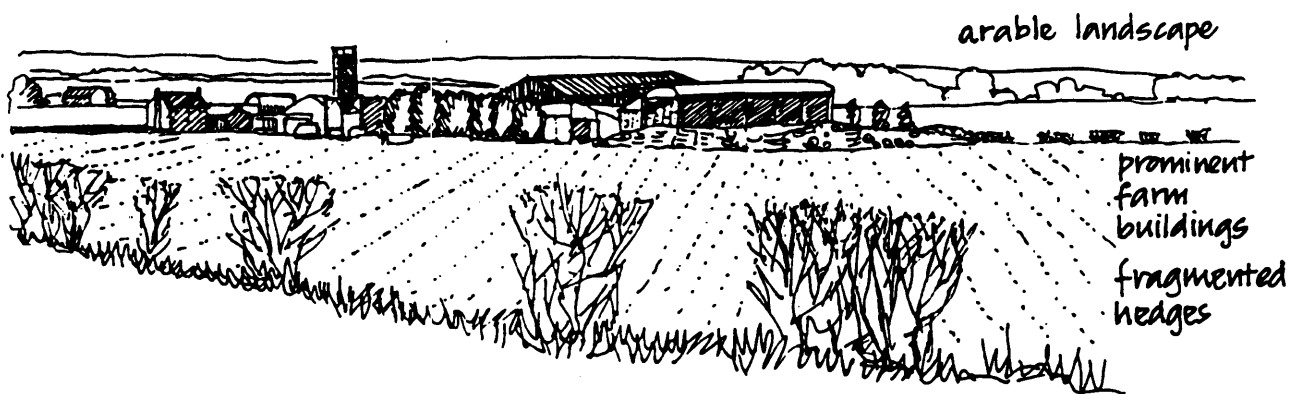
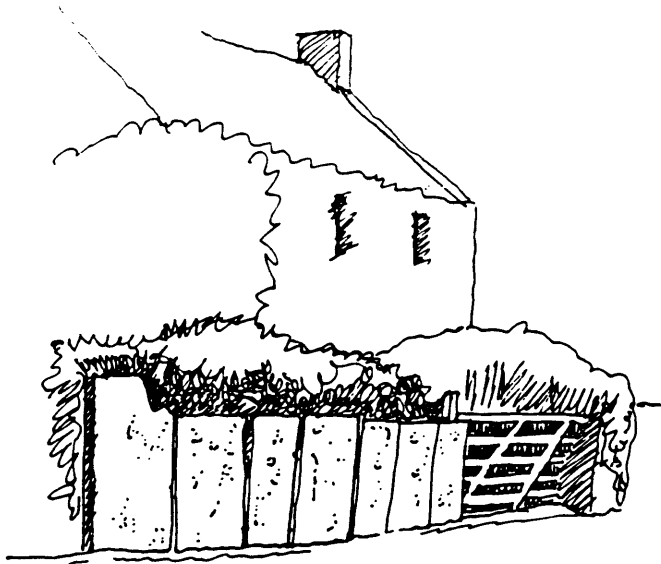


Fig 4. Lower Lias dipslope at Pitney

Generally speaking, observation and the response from parish councils suggests that although this area is well-endowed with natural landscape features, local distinctiveness is becoming diluted by modern development, lack of traditional management and the loss of particular local features like stone-slab walls and paths.



Traditional stone-slab wall
(Keinton Mandeville & Barton St. David.)

VISUAL CHARACTER REGION 2

The Blackdown Hills Plateau, Escarpment, Foothills and Valleys

Introduction

This visual character region (MAP 4, page 22) lies in the extreme west of the district and includes the Parishes of Ashill, Broadway, Buckland St. Mary, Chard, Combe St. Nicholas, Donyatt, Wambrook, Whitestaunton and Tatworth and Forton.

The area is in great contrast to the plain in the east with its amenable gradients and well-drained soils. The Blackdown region and in particular the Neroche area represents a far harsher environment. Here the farmer has to contend with steep slopes and the stony acidic soils derived from the Greensand's thin capping of Clay-with-Flints.

The Greensand plateau is a unique geological feature in southern England. It is mostly in Devon but "fingers" of Greensand push their way into Somerset forming ridges separated by deep valleys. In the Somerset Blackdowns Chalk lies above the Greensand and is exposed in places such as at Stony Down, Combe St Nicholas. Underlying all these rocks are the Keuper Marls and Lower Lias which are only exposed in the valleys.

To the east, the foothills of this plateau merge into the gentler undulating topography of the Lias Clay low-hill country of Donyatt, Broadway, Ashill, an area which has strong historical affinities with the Blackdowns.

Settlement and Land-Use

Little is known about the prehistoric land-use of the area but almost certainly the landscape remained well-wooded much later than the lowland to the east. Clearance of the woodland took place initially on the drier high ground of the ridge tops where agriculture was first practised.

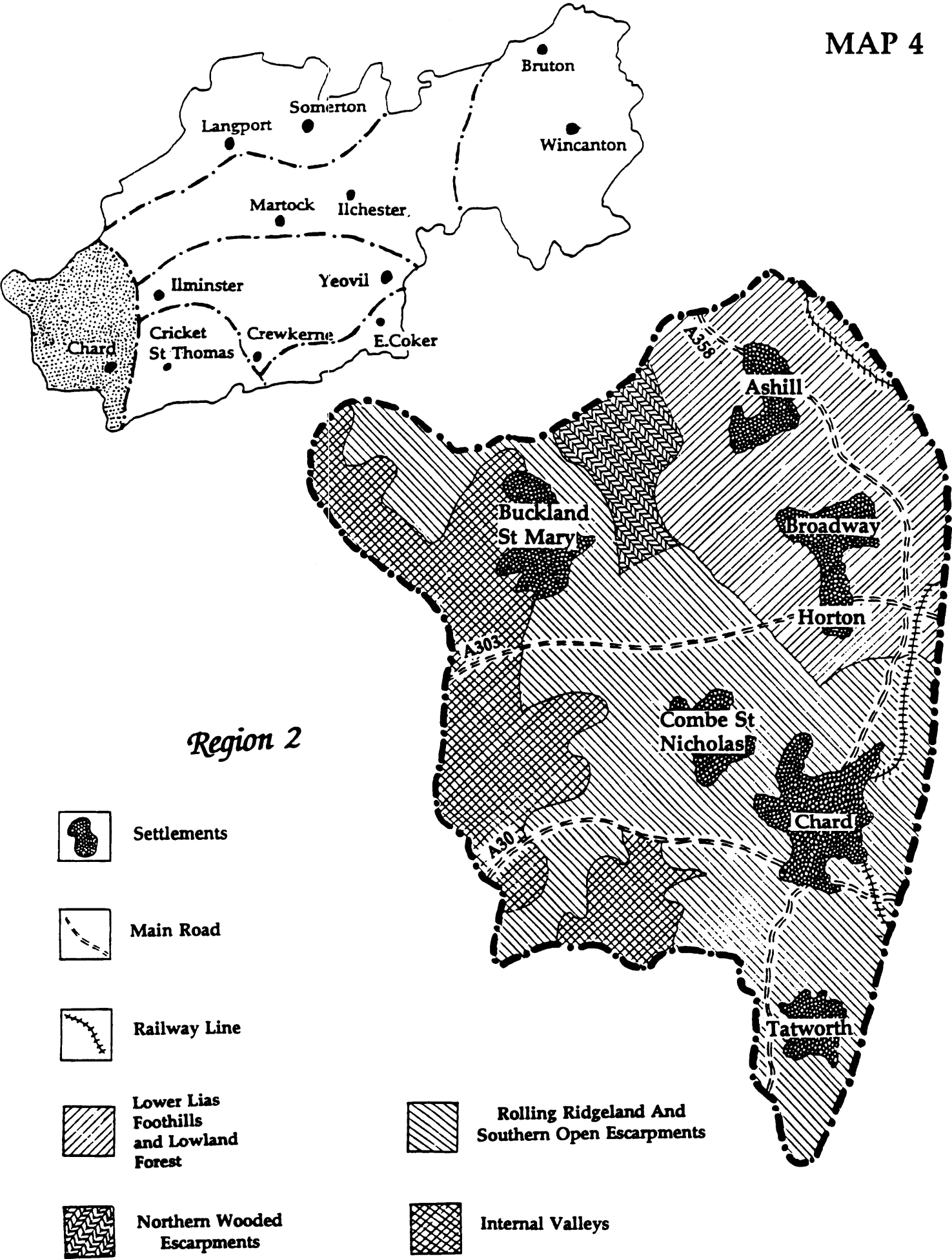
This area is also thought to have been a frontier zone between Celtic tribes. The iron age hill fort at Castle Neroche supports this theory. Certainly the landscape has the feel of a frontier zone when viewed from the east with the thickly wooded escarpment looming on the horizon. The settlement pattern is characteristic of the ancient "unplanned" countryside of the south west, with dispersed farmsteads, hamlets and small villages. A low population density indicative of poor soils and difficult terrain.

The landscape history of the Somerset Blackdowns and fringe area is very much concerned with the gradual enclosure and destruction of the great medieval forest of Neroche. In medieval times this royal forest extended as far east as Isle Brewers and Earnshill, southwards to Donyatt and westwards deep into Devon. Like most royal forests it was not all woodland, but nevertheless according to Rackham (1988) it was the biggest tract of medieval woodland between Salisbury and Lands End. Its fate was sealed in 1633 when Charles I abolished its royal status and the encroachments accelerated. Nevertheless fragments of common remained unenclosed right up to 1830. The field pattern in the area is very revealing. The common land of the ridge-tops is enclosed by straight hedges and roads, whilst the valleys show earlier enclosures, with encroachment into the former forest giving much smaller, irregular shaped fields enclosed in thick, wooded hedges.

Today, most of the arable land is found on the ridges in the late enclosure fields and on the escarpment above Chard. Much of the land in the valleys is too steep or too thin to plough and remains under permanent pasture. There are substantial tracts of conifer and beech plantation.

Blackdown Hills Plateau Footslopes And Valleys

MAP 4



Wildlife

The acknowledged quality of this Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is partly attributed to the retention of its wildlife interest. Because agriculture has remained so traditional many valuable wildlife habitats have survived, some quite distinctive within South Somerset. Acid-heathland, marsh grassland and mire, wet woodland, ancient oak-ash woodland and everywhere ancient hedgerows form a rich mosaic of wildlife value. Areas of interest are acknowledged by Sites of Special Scenic Interest such as Freshmoor, Long Lye and Woolhayes. These wet grasslands are frequently associated with wet woodlands comprising alder, willow and beech. Acid heathland occurs in the upper Yarty near Blackwater where gorse, heather, bracken, birch, rowan and oak scrub support rich birdlife, including nightjar and stone-chat.

There are scattered remnants of ancient semi-natural woodland throughout the region although many are damaged by post-war coniferisation. Many woods are a spring joy with stands of bluebell, wood anemone, wood sorrel and several orchid species.

The ancient hedgerows, many derived from the former forest, contain some of the richest assemblages of wild flowers in South Somerset including wood spurge, wood sage and wild strawberry.

The Blackdown fringe is also good for its wildlife. The alder/ poplar fringed streams such as Venners Water, Fivehead and Ding are unpolluted, and home to kingfisher and dipper. Road verges often have a rich wildflower population including orchid and cowslip. Hedges are similarly diverse in species with goat willow typical and a good many mature oak trees.

Landscape Character

Examined in greater detail it is possible to distinguish a number of zones within which there are certain common characteristics or features. This classification draws heavily on the work carried out for the Countryside Commission in the report 'The Blackdown Hills Landscape' (1989). The Somerset Blackdowns and fringe are divided into

- (1) Northern Wooded Escarpment - the Upland Forest
- (2) Lower Lias Foothills and Lowland -the Lowland Forest
- (3) Rolling Ridgeland and Southern Open Escarpment
- (4) Internal valleys
- (5) The Settlements

(1) NORTHERN WOODED ESCARPMENT - THE UPLAND FOREST

This northern part of the Blackdown plateau presents the traveller approaching from Horton along the A303 with an impressive wooded silhouette against western skies and a formidable climb into Devon.

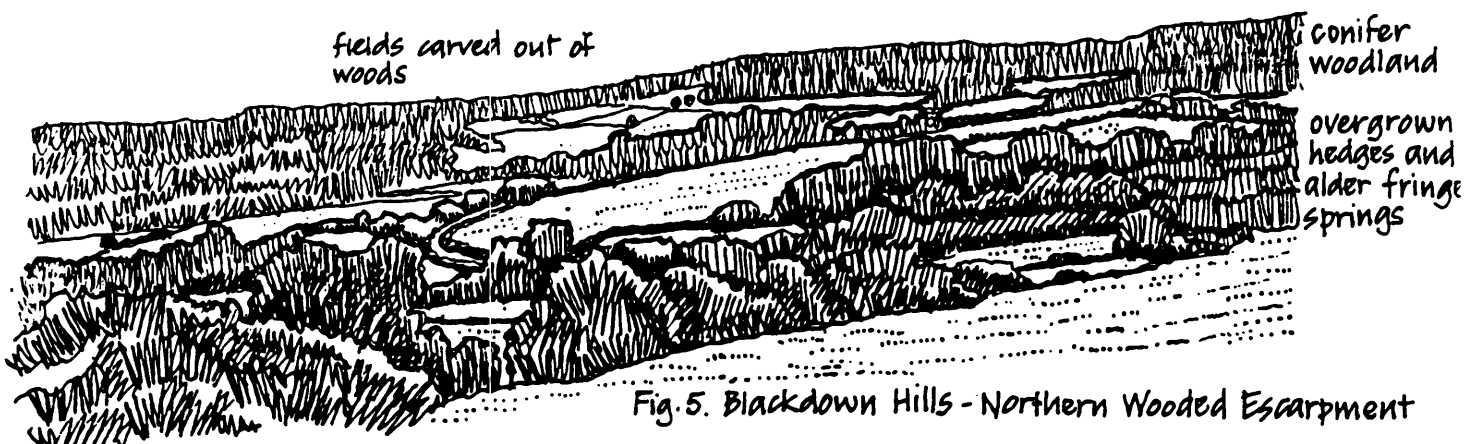


Fig.5. Blackdown Hills - Northern Wooded Escarpment

This landform is the northern eastern tip of the great escarpment which overlooks the vale of Taunton-Deane. The scarp facing South Somerset is not particularly steep but it gradually steepens upward and it is much creased and dissected by streams and pock marked by hollows and folds. The rivers Fivehead and Ding and Venners Water have their sources here.

The landscape is dominated by woodland out of which small clusters of fields are carved and divided by Devon-style hedge banks, (Fig.5), the most impressive of which being alongside narrow, winding lanes. Pastoral fields full of spring colour and where springs occur alder and willow grow amidst tussocky grasses and rushes.

The Domett area is described as:

"a labyrinthine system of tiny irregular fields and massive hedges suggesting even Celtic antiquity" Rackham (1988)

The ridge top is dominated by dramatic beech-edged roads creating green tunnels of light and dark shade. Wood and hedge banks are covered with mosses and ferns and in the sunlight there are numerous wildflowers such as foxglove, stitchwort and germander speedwell.

(2) LOWER LIAS FOOTHILLS/THE LOWLAND FOREST

This zone extends from the District boundary with Taunton Deane south to Chard including substantial areas of Ashill, Beercrocombe, Broadway, Horton, Donyatt, and parts of Ilton.

The footslopes of the wooded plateau peter out into a rolling lowlying landform derived from the Lower Lias clays and shales. These are cut through by several winding streams - the Ding, Venners Water and the Fivehead which forms the district boundary. They are busy streams with clear water and shingle beds. Their courses are easily picked out in the landscape because of their tree-lined banks of alder, ash, willow and in some places distinctive mistletoe-decorated black poplar. (Fig.6)

Fields are larger here and in places clearly derived from the late 19th century enclosure of the medieval wood, pasture and common land. The pattern is rectilinear with straight hedges, roads and droves (Fig.7) such as Ding Drove and Long Drove near Horton. The hand of the surveyor is evident in this precision and the numerous hedgerow, oak and distinctive Scots pines are similarly of regular age and spacing. Sallow and privet are commonly used hedgerow plants and can be distinguished from the earlier 17th Century 'encroachment' hedges by the use of the colourful gorse. Elm is particularly common in the Donyatt hedges. These thick hedges which accounted for 3% of the farmland in 1567 were frequently cut to provide fuel for the extensive Donyatt pottery industry. Remnants of the old Neroche Forest may still exist in the wooded enclosures of Ashill Wood, Stovard Coppice and Burnbeat Copse.

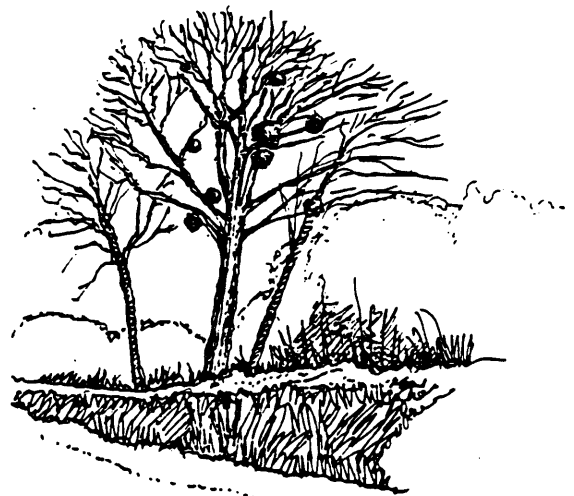


Fig.6. Mistletoe clumps
in Black Poplar

An interesting old field pattern can be seen at Windmill Hill and Hastings. Here irregular boundaries and venerable oaks give an ancient feel characteristic of the medieval assarts found further west. Verges and hedges are herb-rich and there is more unimproved permanent pasture, often grazed by sheep. Lanes are narrow and winding unlike the arrow-straight droves of the 19th century enclosures.

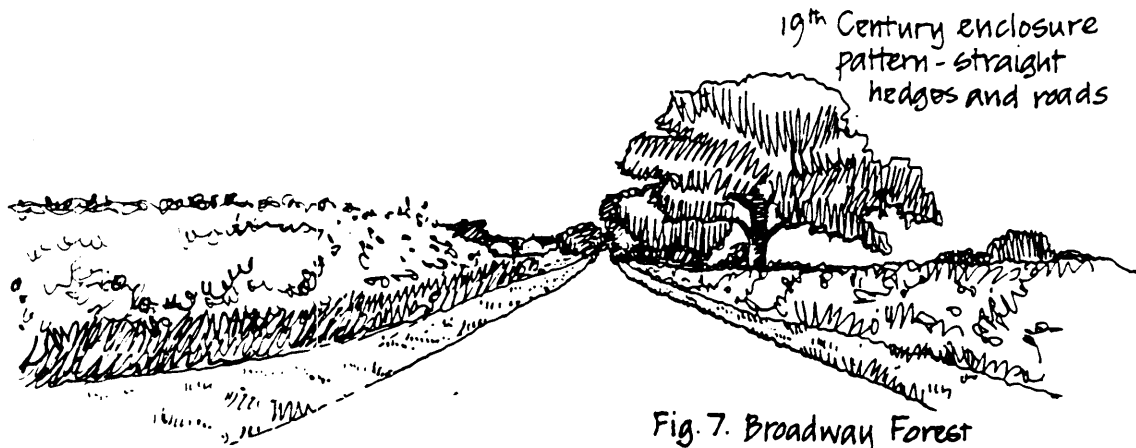


Fig. 7. Broadway Forest

To the south of Donyatt, where names such as "Forest Gate" may indicate the edge of the former Neroche Forest, we see the east facing scarp-slopes of the Blackdown plateau. Still on the Greensand, the slope is also dissected by several streams, giving a rolling east-west grain. Again the streams are significant wooded features, and glimpses of the trees can be seen from the narrow lanes on the ridge top. Some of these blocks of woodland are quite significant when viewed from the east, particularly that at Chilworthy House which also has impressive lime avenues.

Given the difficult terrain there is a surprising amount of arable land around Clayhanger Common. Otherwise improved grass or woodland predominates.

Combe St. Nicholas stands on the edge of the Greensand plateau. This area has some very impressive broad embanked hedges and field patterns whose long curving shapes suggest enclosure of the medieval strip cultivation. Stony Down is a very eye-catching feature. Beech has been planted on the Chalk/Clay with Flints in this area. Cuttifords Door is another enclosed common with straight droves roads and hedges filled with willow. On the western side of Chard at Catch Gate Lane the beech trees mark the transition to the rolling ridgeland landscape.

(3) ROLLING RIDGELAND AND SOUTHERN OPEN ESCARPMENT AND FOOTSLOPES

These are the narrow ridges which separate the valleys of this dissected plateau and represent the dominant characteristic of the AONB in South Somerset (Fig.8).

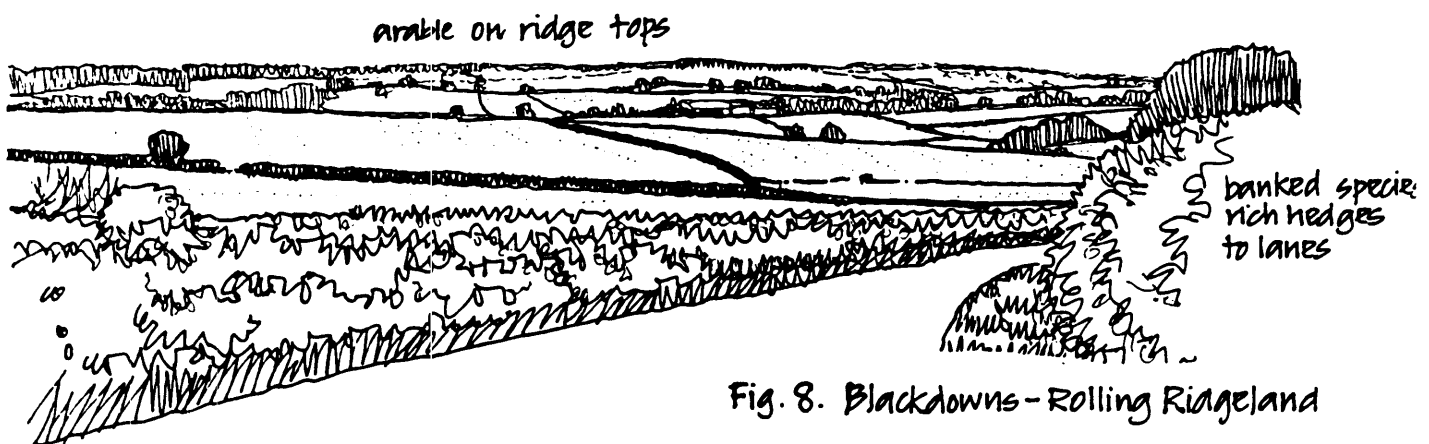
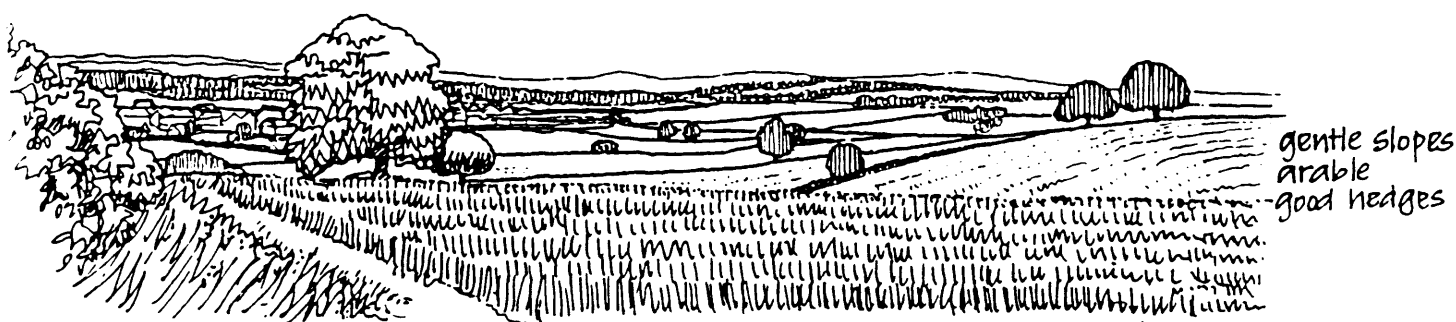


Fig. 8. Blackdowns - Rolling Ridgeland

The eastern boundary of the AONB follows the middle of the ridge which overlooks Chard. This ridge has a gentle slope of predominately arable land with very large fields which change colour as crops are cultivated, ripen and are harvested. Yellow rape is particularly favoured at

present. Beech is a dominant hedgerow tree springing from low-cut, embanked hedges (Fig.9).



gentle slopes
arable
good hedges

Fig. 9. Blackdowns - southern Open Escarpment

Holly is also left to mature and form distinctive clumps on the ridge top (Fig.10). Lanes enclosed by steep embanked hedges often with verges rich in wildflowers wind across the rigeland and down into the valleys.

(4) INTERNAL VALLEYS

These are some of the most beautiful and secretive valleys in South Somerset (Fig.11), heavily wooded both on upper slopes and valley bottoms. This is an ancient landscape of slow change which cannot be tamed even by modern agriculture. Meadowlands are defined by thick broad backed hedges or woodland banks and have many marshy flushes. In spring, before the silage and hay are cut the meadows are colourful with flowers and grasses such as sorrel, buttercup, cuckoo flower and red clover, and hedges and woodlands are a mass of bluebells, ramsons and red campion. Bird song echoes around these natural amphitheatres and the sound of tumbling water is everywhere.

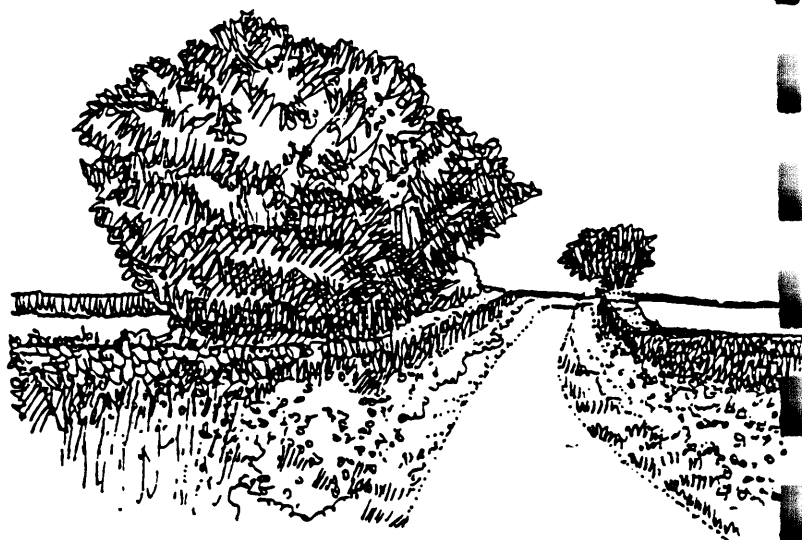


Fig. 10 Solitary roadside hollies



heavily wooded
slopes
rough grazing

Fig. 11. Blackdown Hills - Internal valley Whitestaunton

Rowan is a characteristic small tree of underwood or hedge. Beech often crowns the hills and upper slopes and the wetter areas and streamsides have thick stands of alder and willow often

invading the meadowland, particularly in the Yarty Valley. Extensive coniferisation has taken place in the ancient woodland around Whitestaunton and Wambrook.

A journey through this landscape has to be a cautious one given the narrowness of the lanes and the abrupt changes in gradient. It is however full of surprises and sudden glimpses of architectural or natural interest.

(5) THE SETTLEMENTS

The normal settlement pattern in this area is of dispersed hamlets and farms usually located in the sheltered valleys and coombes rather than the ridgeland of the plateau. Apart from Combe St Nicholas and Horton the villages are generally tiny.

Despite its low population density and lack of wealthy country estates this part of South Somerset has a particularly rich rural architectural heritage.

"It is the ordinary villages, hamlets and farmsteads of the Blackdown Hills - with buildings of local materials from a variety of periods - that distinguish the area in architectural terms most characteristic are the buildings of chert and flint dressed with Hamstone or brick, and roofed with slate or tile. These predominate in the north and east and can be seen for example at Whitestaunton and Higher Wambrook." CCP 258 (1989).

On the Ilminster side the Blackdown fringe contains buildings of both chert and the warmer, soft brown Moolham stone and Hamstone. Crock Street has a number of such farms. Thatch is not uncommon.

The larger settlements of Chard, Combe St Nicholas, Wadeford and Horton/Broadway have a wider range of architectural styles and ages. The nineteenth century settlement of Broadway Forest has a ribbon of new farms along its planned roads and droves. A more modern form of ribbon development has spilled out along the roads radiating from Horton and Broadway and there has been much modern infill development in the larger villages.

ISSUES

Change in the Landscape

It is difficult to isolate individual features or elements which are of individual significance in the Blackdowns' landscape. Its quality lies in its rich complexity and diversity which are well appreciated by the people living there.

Wambrook Parish Council comment:

"Wambrook is of a by-gone age and should be preserved as it is with its old world charm".

All the parish councils in the area commented on their appreciation of the rich wildlife of the area, particularly the wild flower rich hedges and verges. Their response supports the Countryside Commission conclusions.

"In our view it is clear that the landscape of the Blackdown Hills is outstanding because of the combination of unique qualities".

These qualities are listed as the area's isolation from change, its unspoilt nature, unique geology, diverse landscape pattern, botanical diversity and architectural interest. (CCP 258 1989).

The Blackdown Hills are of course subject to the same economic pressures as the rest of South Somerset District - heightened by the inhospitable nature of the farmland. The area is very sensitive to change, and there is evidence of this on the fringe areas where the relatively low tree cover makes new farm buildings more conspicuous, particularly where they overlook intimate valleys. Combe St Nicholas parish council commented on this issue and there is a virtual citadel of modern farm buildings dominating the valley at Howley.

On the arable and improved grasslands of the rolling ridgeland and the southern escarpment overlooking Chard the hedge and hedgebank contain the last vestiges of the rich woodland floras that once were common before 19th century enclosures. Unfortunately with the advent of mechanical hedgerow management the diversity and structure of these roadside habitats are being lost. A particular sad example is the roadside hedge from Cuttifords Door to Hornsbury. Too many hedgerow trees are of the same age, and the beech and Scots pines characteristic of the area (Fig.12) are becoming senile and not being replaced.

The loss of unimproved pasture has been considerable in the Blackdowns. The Somerset Trust has estimated that less than 2% of the grasslands in the area are now of conservation value. Mires and wet heaths are also being drained.

The amount of woodland in the area may not have changed much since the war but its character has altered due to widespread coniferisation. This has improved landscape diversity, but at the expense of wildlife diversity where ancient semi-natural woodland has been replaced with Norway spruce. The devastation wrought by the gales of the late 1970's may give an opportunity to rectify this and at Great Copse, Whitestaunton, broadleaved trees are replacing conifers. Sadly, elsewhere many giant beech trees have been blown down or are succumbing to disease.

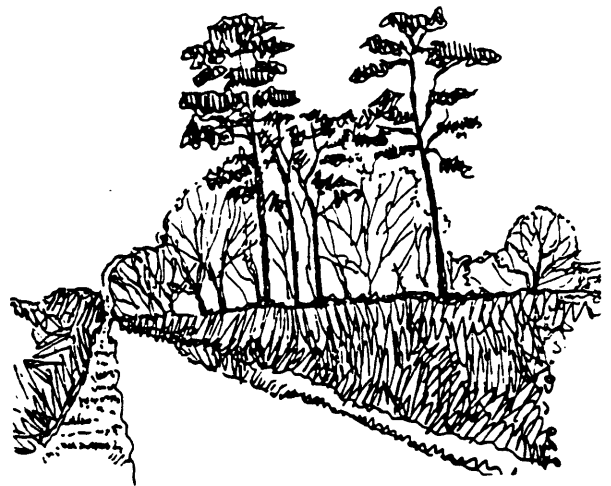


Fig. 12. Hedgerow Scots Pines

The wooded streams flowing off the Blackdown plateau are particularly significant landscape features and are vulnerable to piecemeal felling such as on the upper reaches of the Fivehead at Newtown.

There are a large number of farm ponds in the lowland forest area and these are particularly vulnerable to rubbish dumping or general lack of management.

Finally, the future improvement of the A303 west of Horton is at present being considered. Whether a new route or an improvement of the existing route is chosen, the scale of this project in such a sensitive, cohesive landscape will have a major impact.

VISUAL CHARACTER REGION 3

The Windwhistle Ridge, Foothills and Valleys

Introduction

This is the large block of upland which lies between Chard and Crewkerne and forms the border with Dorset. It includes the parishes of Chillington, Cudworth, Chaffcombe, Cricket St Thomas, Knowle St Giles, Winsham, Wayford and parts of Clapton, Dowlish Wake and West Crewkerne (MAP 5, Page 30).

The geology of the area is akin to that of the Blackdown Hills so not surprisingly the landform and landscape have similarities. The main rocks are Upper Greensand with Chalk and Clay with Flint mantle. Much of these rocks is obscured downslope by the amorphous mixture of eroded rocks known as Head. The base of the Upper Greensand is highest at Warren Hill and lowest at Winsham. Middle Lias silts and marls underlie the lowest slopes within the Axe Valley to the south and the Dowlish area to the north.

Streams radiate from springs on this well-defined plateau and many are cut deep into the surface forming dramatic slopes, deep coombes and valley systems. On the foothills these streams become the attractive wooded valley features known locally as goyles, each separated by long low ridges.

The River Axe separates the Windwhistle plateau from the much larger upland area to the south which is the edge of the Dorset Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Settlement and Land-Use

The plateau is crossed by ancient ridge-top lanes which plunge down the valleys and coombes to isolated farms or hamlets, such as Woolminstone. The larger villages are located on the edge of the plateau mainly in the lush Axe Valley. Land-use is mixed with less intensive pastoral farming in the coombes and the arable on the easier plateau slopes and on the lower land of the silts and clays to the north.

The settlement pattern and landscape is an ancient one of irregular hard-won fields carved out of the terrain. Enclosure was carried out early. Cricket St Thomas was enclosed in 1546, Cudworth as early as the late 14th century, and the only obvious late enclosure is at Chard Common. (Havinden 1981).

Wildlife

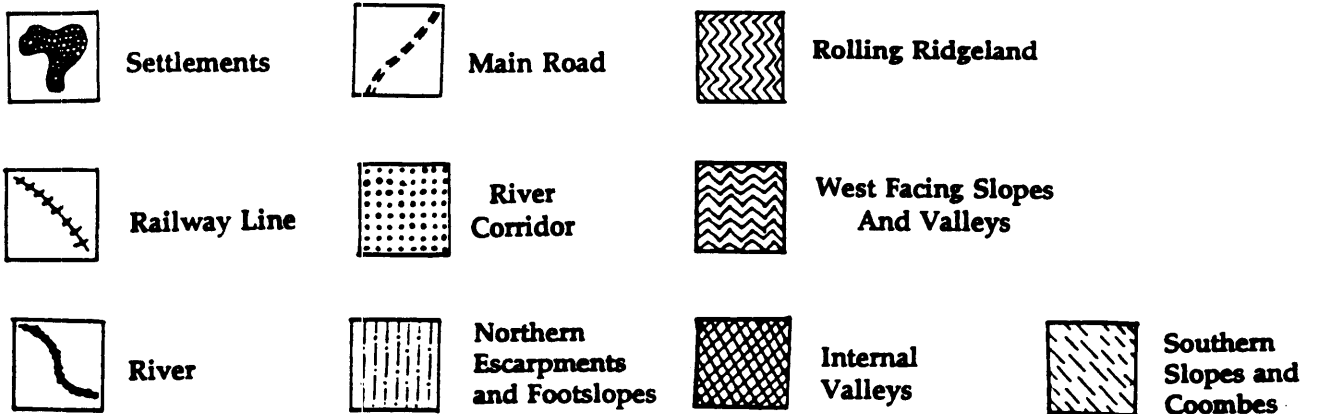
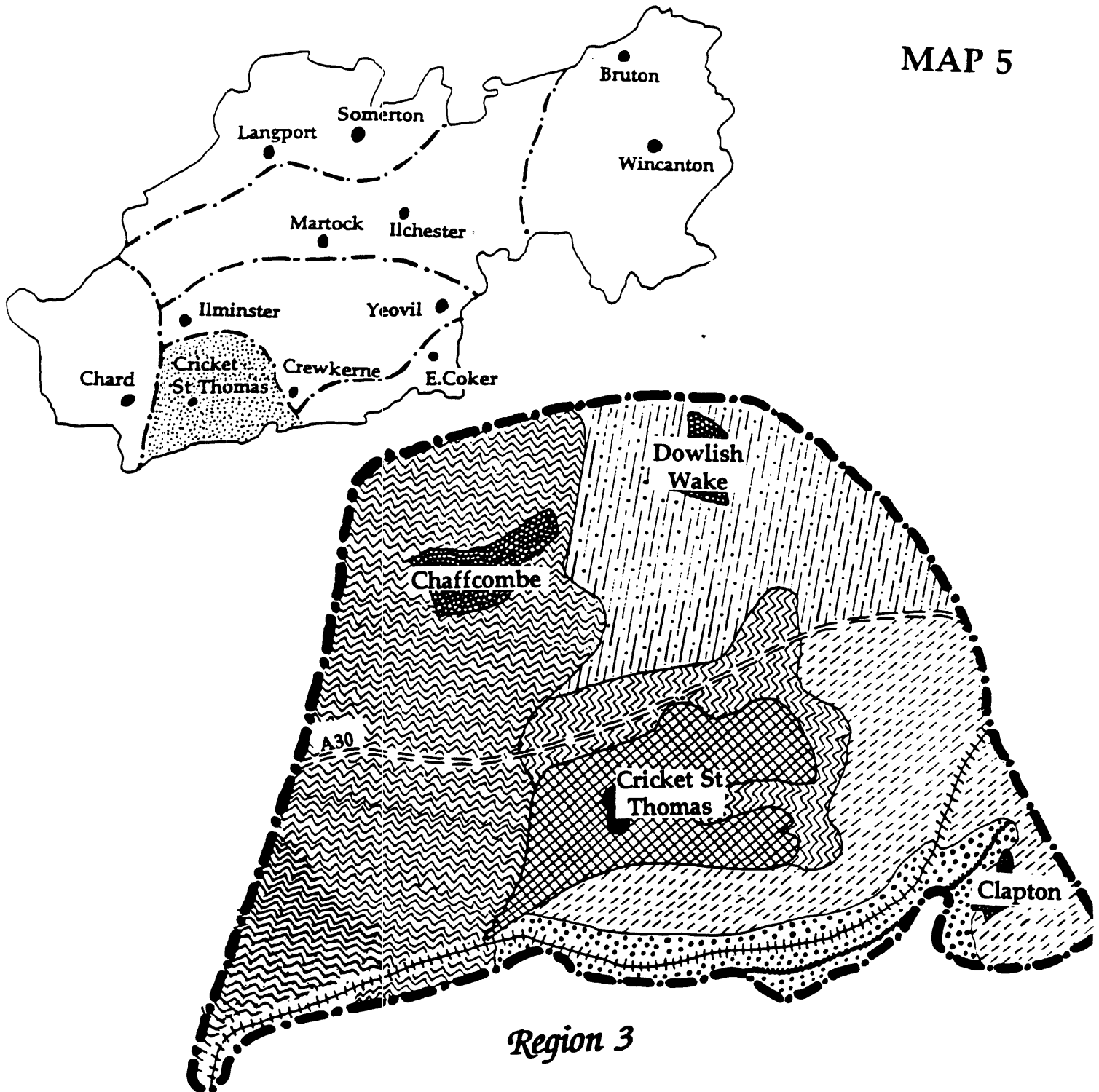
This area contains many similar habitats to the Blackdown Hills. There are some substantial blocks of woodland which associate well with fields of unimproved pasture and marshy flushes. Probably the best ecological 'unit' is the westward facing slope of the plateau comprising Park Wood, Chaffcombe, and the Upper Isle Valley including Chard Reservoir and the wooded enclosure of Horn Moor with its rough herb-rich pasture.

Throughout the area the winding lanes are bounded by ancient hedges and verges rich with bluebell, yellow archangel and violets.

There are enclaves of downland flora on the chalk outcrops, particularly at Purtington.

Windwhistle Ridge Footslopes And Valleys

MAP 5



Landscape Character

Examined in detail it is possible to identify six character zones:

- (1) Northern escarpment and footslopes
- (2) West facing slopes and valley
- (3) Internal valley system
- (4) South facing slopes and valleys
- (5) Rolling ridgeland
- (6) Settlements

(1) NORTHERN ESCARPMENT AND FOOTSLOPES

This north-facing escarpment extends from the ridge top occupied by the A30 into the Dowlish Brook valley to the north and from Cricket Malherbie in the west to Roundham near Crewkerne.

At 200 metres above sea level there are magnificent views across central South Somerset to the Fivehead ridge and beyond.

Land cover is a mixture of conifers and hardwoods and there are fragments of ancient semi-natural woodland at Holcombe Copse and Old Wood near Cudworth. A magnificent belt of mature beech trees crowns the ridge. Elsewhere woodland has been cleared to create fields of all sizes and shapes but predominantly pastoral. Lanes enclosed by hedge banks wind down off the ridge. The Cricket Malherbie road with its rich wild flower verges and ancient oak and beech trees is particularly impressive.

The north-south grain of the road network is echoed by the natural features of the water courses which flow from a spring line just below the ridge summit (Fig.13).

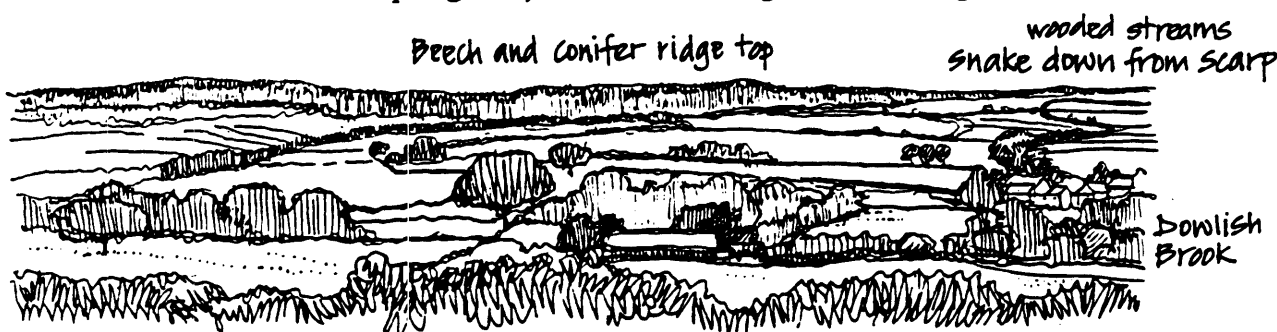


Fig. 13. Windwhistle Ridge - Northern Escarpment
from Dowlish Wake

These streams, such as Stretford Water and Wall Brooks are attractively fringed with woodland to create the "goyle" feature which is characteristic of South Somerset. The rolling lowland here is divided into larger fields separated by low hedges and few hedgerow trees. There is a high proportion of arable farming.

The Dowlish brook forms a pleasant small scale valley. Its course is defined by alders and willows and by traditional meadows, yellow with buttercups in spring.

(2) WEST FACING SLOPES AND VALLEY

This is a continuation of the escarpment but with a west facing aspect. The landform reflects the Blackdown Hills on the other side of the 'Chard Gap'. The zone extends from Marshwood northwards to Knowle St Giles.

The upper slopes are heavily wooded. Park Wood, is a landscape and ecological feature forming the backdrop to Chaffcombe. The area is a delightful contrast to the busy streets of nearby Chard, inviting exploration of its deep lanes with flower-rich hedgebanks and many old oak and beech trees. There are many similarities to the valley landscapes of the Blackdowns.

To the west are glimpses of the infant river Isle in a valley lined with alders and willows abutting a narrow belt of meadowland. A major landscape feature here is the beautiful Chard Reservoir which is framed by a great variety of trees, a testimony to Victorian engineering and arboreal tastes.

South of Chard Reservoir and just east of Chard through the Chard Gap, is the enclosed wilderness of Chaffcombe and Chard Common. Extending to and including Horn Moor at Tatworth and Forton, this is a distinctive pocket of landscape variety containing a rectilinear field pattern enclosed by ruler-straight hedges, droves and roads. Although enclosed, it is not a tamed or productive landscape. It contains much rough but colourful pasture and alder-birch-willow woodland. Scots pine is a distinctive hedgerow tree (Fig.12) and gorse and goat willow are eye-catching hedgerow shrubs. There are parallels with late enclosure hedging in the Lowland Forest and Cuttifords Door areas described above.

(3) INTERNAL VALLEYS

The main valley system passes through Cricket St Thomas. The valley is fed by many springs and streams which have cut back into the high ground, creating steep slopes often afforested with an attractive mixture of conifers. The valley floor is marshy in many places, and at Purtington alders are invading the colourful rough pasture. To the west, the valley opens up and becomes a 'designed' landscape. Cricket Park has some beautiful clumps of beech and many specimen trees surrounding a system of small lakes.

(4) SOUTHERN SLOPES AND COOMBES

This area extends from Coombe to Winsham overlooking the heavily wooded and lush Axe Valley which separates South Somerset from Dorset.

The narrow ridge-top lanes of Venley Lane and Chard Lane are characterised by their fringe of trees which wind down the valley. Either side of Venley Lane and Chard Lane are coombes of different character; open and grassy as at Coombe, or heavily wooded as at Wayford (Fig.14).

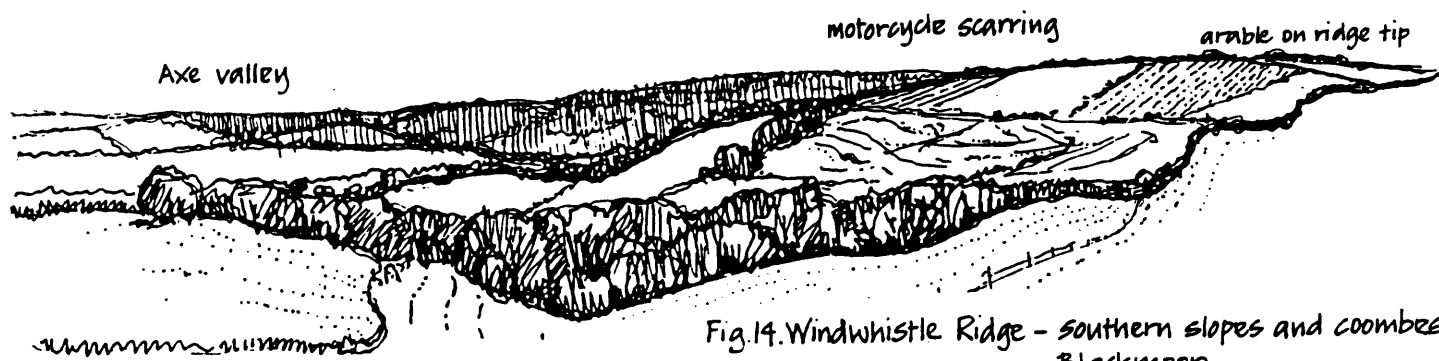


Fig.14. Windwhistle Ridge - southern slopes and coombes, Blackmoor

The gentle slopes are ploughable and are improved grassland or arable. Chalk exposed by ploughing is particularly eye-catching and an unusual sight in Somerset. The steeper slopes are much less manicured with broad overgrown hedges and rough grazing and scrub.

The infant River Axe meanders southwards through its broad valley into Dorset. The landscape is very enclosed and "bosky" with waterside trees, alders and pollard willows. Near Forde Abbey the regimented stands of commercial poplars are a distinctive feature. The Exeter-Waterloo railway line passes through this valley and cuttings, embankments and bridges add to the complexity of scenery.

(5) ROLLING RIDGELAND

The landscape formed at the summit of this dissected plateau is primarily open and pastoral with few trees and hedges. The main features are the hedge-lined lanes whose distinctive, evenly spaced rounded trees can be seen from some distance in the valleys below (Fig.15).



Fig. 15. Windwhistle Ridge - Rolling Ridgeland

These trees includes a high proportion of sycamore. Other hedge plants include oak, ash, field maple, dogwood and viburnum. Ancient holly trees are left untouched and respected out of local custom.

(6) SETTLEMENTS

This region is sparsely populated and villages and hamlets are dispersed and small. Farms are often tucked into the shelter of the upper combes, although some farms stand out prominently on the bare ridgetop. Most settlements nestle into the warm sheltered side of the plateau.

Winsham is the largest village, a pleasant mixture of buildings of varying age and appearance. A common theme is the use of the hard chert rubble with brick detailing. There are a good number of thatched houses and there us quite a number of white and colour washed houses.

Wayford is etched into the hillside in a very sylvan setting. Specimen trees have been planted at Wayford Manor and Wayford Woods. Again chert rubble and brick/Hamstone detailing is a common architectural theme.

On the west facing slope can be found Chaffcombe, a delightful small village with a wooded backdrop to its prominently positioned parish church.

On the north facing slopes and into the Dowlsh Valley, Dowlsh Wake, Chillington and Cudworth have a mixture of chert and hamstone traditional, orchards are also significant.

ISSUES

Change in the Landscape

Like the Blackdown Hills, the essential character of this region is the contrast between the open sparsely-treed hilltops heavily wooded valleys and scarp slopes.

Woodlands are often regarded as permanent features of the landscape but their maintenance depends on management and investment. The standard of woodland management varies considerably throughout the region with farm woodlands generally showing that their management takes a lower priority than other farming duties.

Although the Windwhistle Ridge seems to be relatively well wooded, it is made up of a number of blocks of woodland separated by large parcels of fields. There would seem to be opportunity for enlarging and linking the woodlands to make more economic units of better landscape and wildlife value.

Ridgetop trees are often single, aged and vulnerable to wind-throw. The Cricket Malherbie roadside beeches have suffered particularly badly. Here more planting and promotion of

hedgerow saplings would help to redress the balance. The famous Windwhistle ridgetop beeches also suffer losses every winter. Their long term replacement is a major issue.

There are some modern barns, at West Crewkerne and Monkham Down which have made a negative impact on the landscape.

The tourism and leisure industry has brought mixed blessings to the rural scene. Cricket St Thomas Wildlife Park has been much developed, and its success has helped with the restoration of the parkland. Windwhistle golf course has brought suburbanisation and loss of ancient hedgerows but some substantial areas of new planting are proposed. Caravan sites have been developed in woodlands at Forton and paintball games have been proposed at Holcombe Copse. Motorcycling has scarred old hillside pasture near Blackmoor Wood (Fig.14).

VISUAL CHARACTER REGION 4

Ham Hill Plateau, Yeovil Sands Escarpments and Valleys

Introduction

This is a highly complex geological region and its many contrasting land-uses make it the least homogeneous of our six regions (MAP 6, page 36).

Between Yeovil and Ilminster the landform is dictated by the characteristics of Upper and Middle Lias rocks predominantly Ham Hill Stone, Yeovil Sands and Pennard Sands. The parishes on these formations are Chilthorne Domer, Tintinhull, Yeovil Without, Stoke-sub-Hamdon, Norton-sub-Hamdon, Montacute, Chiselborough, Barwick, Brympton, Merriott, Lopen, South Petherton, Shepton Beauchamp, the Seavingtons, Dinnington, Stocklinch, Puckington, Barrington, Hinton St George, Ilminster, Whitelackington and parts of West Chinnock, East Chinnock, West Coker, East Coker, West Crewkerne and Dowlish Wake.

All these formations are cut through by many rivers and streams depositing alluvium and creating distinctive river corridor landscapes.

Settlement and Land-Use

The historic settlement pattern of this region differs markedly from that of the western regions discussed earlier. The area is densely populated with numerous villages and hamlets. Villages on the Upper and Middle Lias are usually no more than 2 or 3 miles apart, separated by intensely cultivated land. The easily worked soils of the Yeovil Sands have been highly valued and the landscape that has emerged is due to centuries of human endeavour. The enclosure of these easily worked soils was long and drawn out:

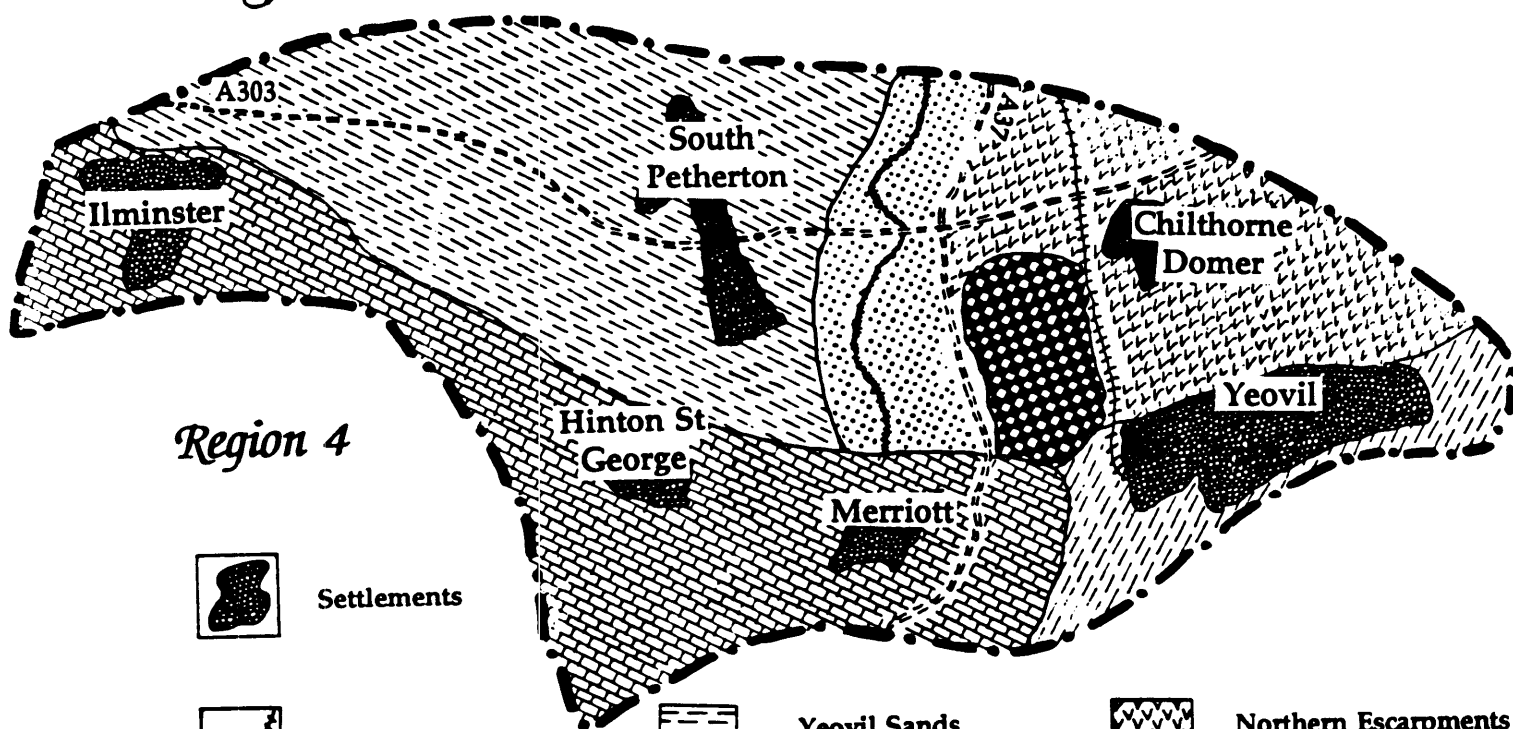
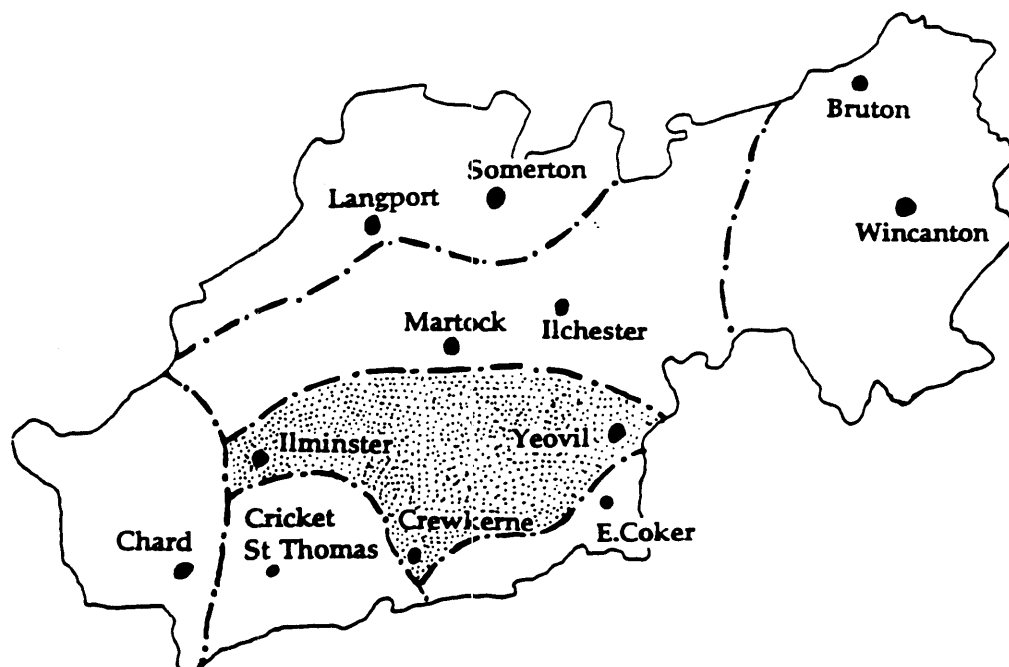
"vast open fields of corn stretch to the horizon. Technically they are enclosed; and most traces of the semi-communal farming of the open field system have long since vanished but although the individually owned fields are large they are often still only separated from one another by the grassy banks of medieval times. Most of the farms still cluster in the villages and it does not require much imagination in a place like Shepton Beauchamp to transport oneself back to Tudor times, yet this is the centre of highly mechanised and prosperous modern farming." Havinden (1981)

This productivity has been exploited since prehistoric times and the great iron age hillfort of Ham Hill commanded vast ploughlands. The Romans also recognised the "bread basket" possibilities of the area and soon established large estates with villas at Stanchester and Yeovil, close to the arterial Fosse Way. Population pressure in medieval times saw cultivation spreading up the steeper slopes in the form of strip lynchets as at West Chinnock, Stocklinch and South Petherton.

In the Middle Ages the prosperity of the region was expressed in terms of the building and rebuilding of farmhouses, manors and finally the great country seats of successful families like the Earls Poulet and the Phelips. This "southern arc" has the greatest concentration of listed buildings, historic parks and gardens and conservation areas in Somerset.

Ham Hill Plateau, Yeovil Sands Escarpments And Valleys

MAP 6



Region 4



Settlements



Railway Line



Main Road



River



Yeovil Sands
Low Hill Country



Ham Hill Stone
Hills And Valleys



River
Corridor



Northern Escarpments
Dipslopes And Foothills



Yeovil Sands
Hills And Valleys



Yeovil Sands Dipslope
And Escarpments

Wildlife

The success of farming on the Yeovil Sands lowland country has pushed wildlife into marginal enclaves. In particular the deeper holloways are refuges for ancient coppice stools of oak, ash, field maple and hazel, harts tongue fern and wild garlic are familiar plants in these cool dark and moist corridors. In the open, field margins are formed only by abrupt changes in slope or field lanes, and are dominated by coarse grasses and herbs such as false oat-grass, hogweed and thick banks of bracken.

The greatest wildlife diversity lies in the Ham Hill stone and Yeovil Sands hill country around Odcombe and West Crewkerne. Here the slopes are too steep to cultivate and the turf contains grasses such as sweet vernal, yellow oat-grass and flowers such as wild thyme and birds-foot trefoil. Grassland butterflies, the blues and browns are locally common. Most of the woodland is found on these slopes or alongside streams which have cut deeply into the easily eroded bedrock. The Yeovil Sands in general are a favoured haunt of burrowing animals. There are ancient badger setts and rabbit warrens and few holloways lack the resulting avalanches of freshly-dug, fine, yellow soils.

Set-aside land near Ham Hill has reintroduced extensive acres of flowering arable weeds, which are very good for birds and insects.

Landscape Character

Examined in greater detail it is possible to identify six character zones within this landscape region.

- (1) Northern escarpments dip slopes and foothills
- (2) Yeovil Sands dip slopes and escarpments
- (3) Ham Hill stone hills and valleys
- (4) Yeovil Sands hills and valleys
- (5) Yeovil Sands low hill country
- (6) River corridors
- (7) Settlements

(1) NORTHERN ESCARPMENTS; DIP SLOPES AND FOOTHILLS

This visual zone is the combination of three basic topographical units-the low Pennard Sands/Junction Bed escarpment which Yeovil surmounts. The Liassic Silts and Marls dip-slop with its minor escarpment at Chilthorne Domer, and the Yeovil Sands, Pennard Sands/Junction Bed footslopes and ridges which can best be viewed from the A3088 north of Montacute.

Approached from the Vale of Ilchester to the north the escarpment is an important land-mark identifying the location of Yeovil. In places buildings are silhouetted on the ridge; in others woodland and trees provide an important screen. Gradients are not severe and cultivation or improved pasture reaches high up the slope. Lanes and roads spill over onto the plain below cutting deep holloways characteristic of the more sandy rock formations. Water courses have also cut deep tree-filled ravines of which Longcroft Wood is the best example.

To the west, the landscape is rolling mixed farmland. Hedges, usually of elm are generally intact but kept low. Remaining hedge-trees are few, usually ash and suffering die-back. The most significant landscape features are the alder and willow-lined streams such as Ball's Water and Wellham Brook; the latter having some fine willow pollards and traditional waterside buttercup-meadows.

The designed parkland landscapes of Montacute House and Brympton D'Evercy add grandeur to the landscape.

(2) YEOVIL SANDS DIP SLOPES AND ESCARPMENTS

This topographical unit embraces the built-up area of Yeovil as far south as Barwick and Stoford and west to Odcombe and East Chinnoek. The town lies on a distinctive landform feature - a dip-slope with a southwards inclination providing Yeovil with many hills to climb. To the south the dip-slope is abruptly terminated by a low but attractive wooded escarpment through which holloways and goyles such as Ninespings are cut. This Yeovil Sands escarpment runs west as far as Odcombe and Stoke Sub Hamdon and eastwards into Dorset and north to South Cadbury.

The escarpment has not proved to be an obstacle to development which spills over along West Coker Road onto another dip slope whose profile can be seen from Pincushion corner at East Coker. South flowing streams have created shallow valleys into this dip slope and there are some very impressive, atmospheric holloways between East Coker and East Chinnoek.

".....Now the light falls
Across the open field, leaving the deep lane
Shuttered with branches, dark in the afternoon,
....."

T.S. Eliot "East Coker"

Designed landscapes are particularly important to the character of Yeovil. Aldon Park, Barwick Park and Newton Surmaville have provided a rich legacy of specimen trees and avenues much loved by Yeovilians.

(3) HAM HILL STONE HILLS AND VALLEYS

This is an impressive dissected plateau where the Yeovil Sands are "protected" from erosion by the harder Hamstone capping.

The northern edge of this plateau is really an extension of the Ninespings escarpment in Yeovil, but here it becomes a much higher and dramatic feature emphasised by high-forest woodland at Hedgecock near Montacute. The north-west "corner" consists of the dramatic profile of the Ham Hill hillfort. In 1620 the Spanish ambassador wrote to the King of Spain.

"From the fortress by Montacute can be seen one of the
finest views in Europe"
(Source Norton Sub Hamdon Parish Council)

The southern flank of the plateau has several out-lying hillocks. The upper slopes are usually thick with gorse and bracken and there is a distinctive "scrub-line" between the cultivated footslopes and the rough sheep grazing.

The fairly level plateau top supports arable crops, but the internal valleys are a different world, with scrubby bracken-covered sheep pasture and woodland providing a much loved hill-country walking area centred on Ham Hill Country Park (Fig.16).

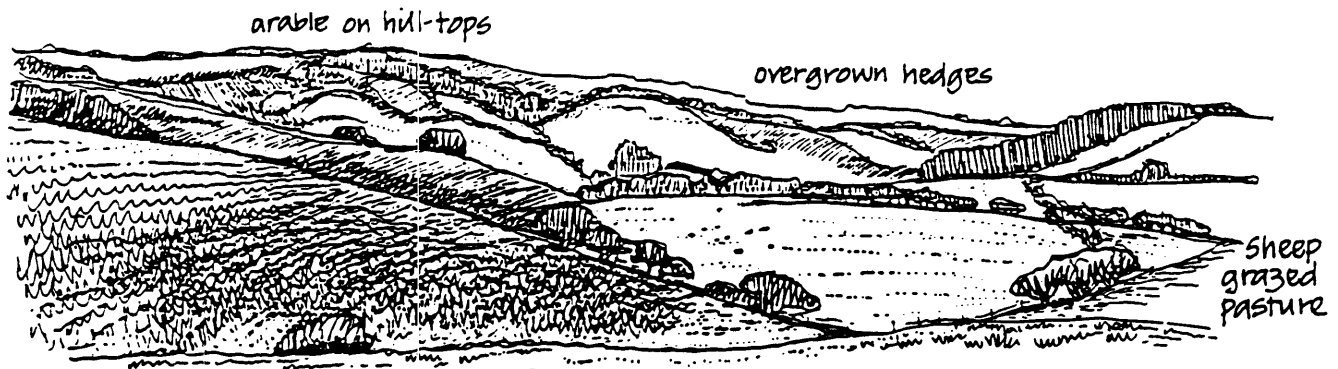


Fig.16. Ham Hill Stone Hills and valleys near Odcombe

(4) YEOVIL SANDS HILLS AND VALLEYS

This covers the hilly country north and west of Crewkerne as far west as Herne Hill. This is a very attractive area where deep, bracken and gorse-covered combs like Tuncombe, contrast with intensive arable lands crossed by deep wooded goyles like Fords Croft Goyl and Shippen Lea Goyl. There are a number of woodlands, many coniferized. Beech is also a successful introduction. Apart from a few on road-sides, hedges are no longer a significant landscape feature, and Hinton Park, once a "designed" landscape is now a large arable field. Hinton St George sits astride a low wooded escarpment which looks like a small-scale version of Windwhistle when viewed from the north.

The landscape to the north and west of Merriott village is described as an

"interesting balance of low hills and small valleys,
with medium sized fields, well hedged"

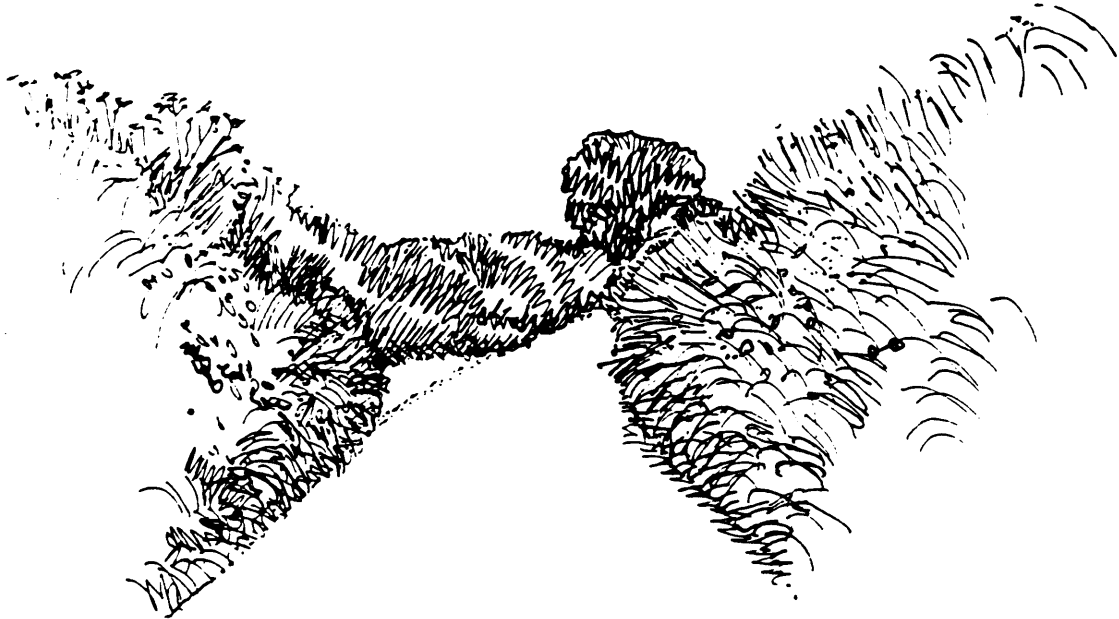
Merriott Parish Council 1991

This description also fits the outlying hills at Pretwood and Herne Hill, Ilminster. These form an attractive setting to that town with a particularly pleasing combination of broadleaved woodland, herb-rich pastures, old down-slope hedge patterns and an ancient ridge-top parish boundary. The "reverse side" to the south is a contrast of intensive arable cropping and few trees.

(5) YEOVIL SANDS LOW HILL COUNTRY

This describes the rich arable lands north of Merriott with its extensive outcrops of the Yeovil Sands. The landform is a long dip-slope terminating at Barrington, Shepton Beauchamp and Stocklinch, with a shallow scarp formed from the Junction Bed rocks. This represents some of the most fertile farmland in South Somerset. The main landscape features are the numerous holloways thickly lined with old hazel, oak, ash and maple coppice. In summer these become long, cool, sun-dappled green corridors, the haunt of speckled wood butterflies and the location of immense badger setts (Fig.17). Otherwise the landscape is relieved by only a few trees and hedges, located mostly near the watercourses.

Fig.17. Yeovil Sands Low Hill Country
Contrasting Holloways near South Petherton.



Grass and bracken banks - hedges removed



Hazel, oak and ferns
enclose ancient holloway

The agricultural land-use around Shepton Beauchamp, South Petherton and Merriott must be amongst the most diverse in Britain. Fields of maize, wheat, rape, flax, peas, potatoes, cabbages (Fig 18), beet and roses can be found alongside huge cider orchards filled with sheep.



Fig.18. Yeovil Sands Low Hill Country - Shepton Beauchamp

Woodland is scarce and confined to the scarp slopes near Barrington Court, Whitelackington and at Drayton. The skyline at Over Stratton is dominated by orchard shelterbelts of Lombardy Poplar and willows (Fig.19). The lack of hedges in this area is in part due to agricultural improvement but Havinden (1981) puts it down to the extraordinary lack of influence of the enclosure movement. At Seavington St Michael

"...enclosure had made little progress by 1987... it was being actively pursued by Winchester college lands in 1914-15 yet by 1932 much of the former Nether Field remained open, and it was still unfenced in 1973 with grassy balks separating strips."



Fig. 19. Yeovil Sands Low Hill Country - orchards & shelterbelts. Over Stratton

Despite this lack of a traditional hedge pattern there is considerable interest in the diversity of productive land and in the changing colours and textures of each maturing crop.

The new A303 trunk road has made a major impact on this open landscape both in visual and noise terms and the new planting, whilst relieving the rawness, will make the road even more obvious.

(6) RIVER VALLEYS

The Rivers Yeo, Parrett and their tributaries make an important contribution to the diversity of the scenery as they cut through the Yeovil Sands. The Yeo occupies a gorge-like feature which was taken advantage of by the railway. The Parrett is a more juvenile river. Near its source at

North Perrott, the river is a most natural water course, thickly cloaked with alders and willows and with most of its flood plain remaining as traditional grazing pasture.

(7) THE SETTLEMENTS

This region has some of the richest architectural heritage in south west England. Much of this high quality is owed to the mellow, golden stone which for centuries has been hewed out of Ham Hill. This shelly iron-rich limestone is used throughout as rubble for basic walling and as ashlar or freestone for refined architectural detailing in Elizabethan mansions. Hamstone can be seen at its best in villages and towns such as Barrington, Hinton St George, Ilminster and Crewkerne.

Trees and woodlands including orchards, are still vital ingredients in the settings of many settlements particularly Yeovil, East Coker, Whitelackington, Stocklinch, Barrington, Haselbury, North Perrott, West Coker, Chiselborough, Shepton Beauchamp, Montacute, Thorne Coffin and Lufton. Yeovil is a large sprawling town cradled by its wooded escarpments and is the subject of a supplementary report (Appendices).

ISSUES

Change in the Landscape

In such a large and complex geographical area it is difficult to pick out the most important elements. However certain features are remarked upon by local people and this provides the indicator to the key features of the landscape. Views from the ridges and hills such as Herne Hill, Ham Hill, Balham Hill and Pen Woods are much appreciated. Hollow-ways, orchards, strip lynchets and flower-rich verges are the details which make up the overall character of this attractive countryside.

Local people are very concerned about overhead wires in villages and across open country, and the loss of orchards, which is apparent in most villages. A survey of orchard loss has shown that Barrington has lost 40% of its 1903 orchards, Shepton Beauchamp 97%, South Petherton 30% (source SSDC 1992), even modern orchards have been grubbed out at Allowenshay and Norton Sub-Hamdon. Loss of hedgerow trees, flailing of hedges and the loss of roadside flower-rich verges are regretted. Ugly modern barns, black silage-bag stacks and the visual and audible impact of the improved A303 are similarly noted as alien features in the landscape.

The loss of orchards is particularly regrettable as these act as buffers softening the edge of urban development and adding visual variety and "sense-of-place".

The future of hollow-ways is of growing importance given their significance to the landscape and wildlife. Their sympathetic management must be promoted.

Modern barns which often replace village farms, need more thought to their integration into the landscape. In the open Yeovil Sands landscape their scale and form makes less of a visual impact than on the east-west ridges to the south and west of Yeovil.

The terrible winter soil erosion problems around Shepton Beauchamp need concerted conservation effort. Farm Woodland schemes and hedgerow planting may be part of a solution.

Woodlands are suffering from neglect and parklands, particularly Barwick and Alton Park need restoration.

The loss of traditional riverside grazing meadows is also having a damaging effect on the landscape.

The Yeovil Sands/Ham Hill stone country lies close to large centres of population and is under

considerable recreational pressure. Golf courses, motor-bike scrambling, car-boot sales and other pursuits are making demands on the traditional land use pattern of the area.

Finally, urban growth means demands for waste disposal and the deep natural hollows and valleys close to Yeovil are eagerly sought for this but potentially at the expense of the beautiful natural landform, wildlife and tranquillity loved by many residents and visitors.

VISUAL CHARACTER REGION 5

Ridges and Vales South and West of Yeovil

Introduction

South and west of Yeovil there are a series of east-west ridges and vales made up of the more calcareous and younger Middle and Upper Jurassic formations of Fullers Earth and Forest Marble. The parishes in this area are Closworth, Hardington Mandeville, North Perrott, Haselbury Plucknett, Misterton and parts of Crewkerne, East and West Chinnock, East and West Coker and Barwick (MAP 7, page 45).

Wildlife

This limestone region south of Yeovil is one of the richest areas for wildlife in South Somerset. Limestones with stoney soils cap the ridges. The intervening clays result in heavy soils which are difficult to cultivate in wet seasons and traditional pasture is the rule. Hedges, largely absent from the Yeovil sands area are numerous, embanked and thick with a high number of shrubs and woodland plants. Woodland blocks are larger and usually ancient semi-natural. Most road verges and the steeper hillside slopes have rich wildflower colonies. Towards the Dorset border there are some remarkably ecologically rich semi-natural farmed and wooded landscapes of which Whitevine and Grove Farm SSSI's are the best. Clematis, wayfaring tree, spindle and pendulous sedge (Fig.20) on the wetter clays are particularly eye-catching.



Fig.20 Pendulous Sedge

Sutton Bingham reservoir is an important site for wintering and resident water fowl.

Landscape Character

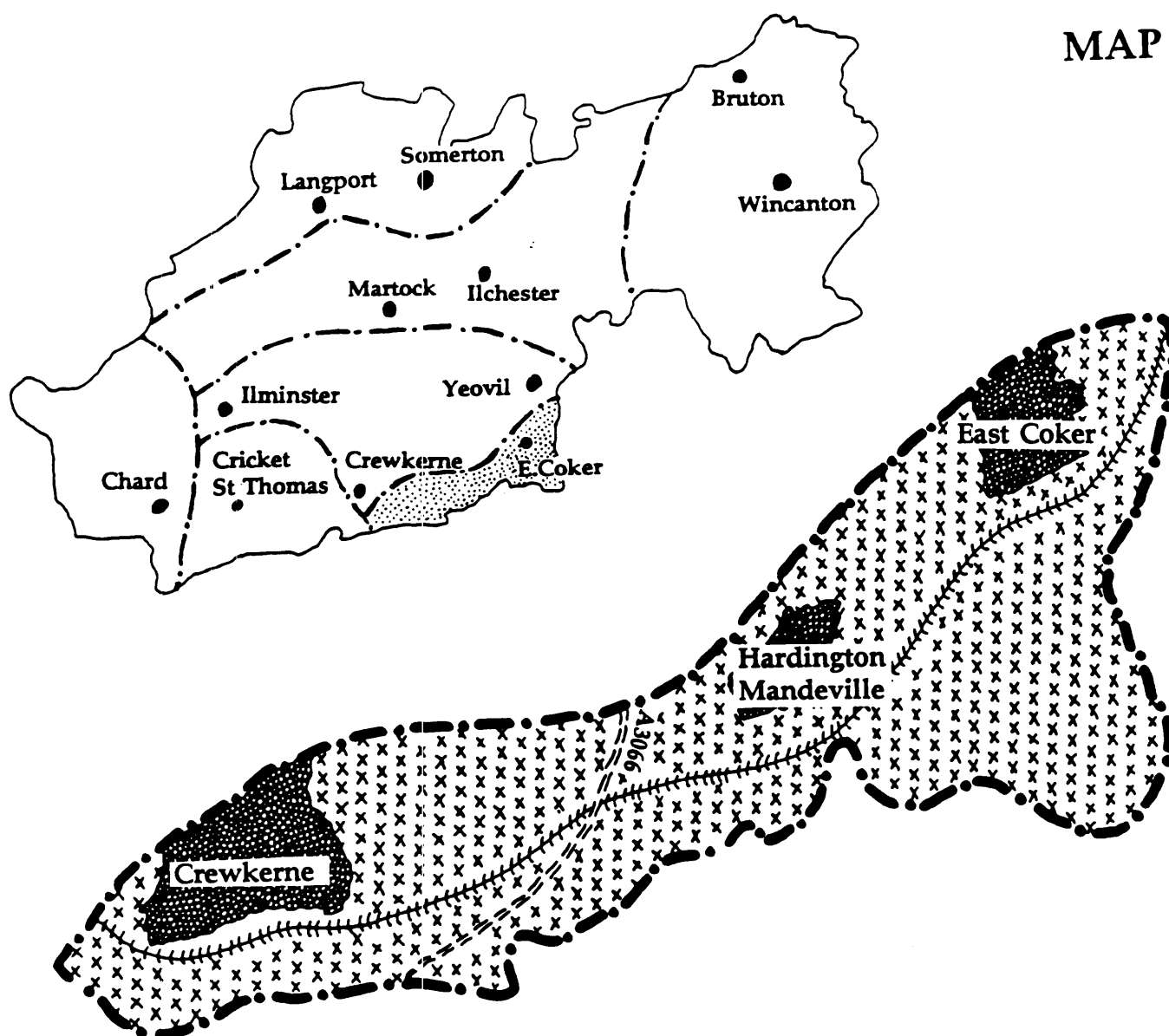
The contrast between this area and the Yeovil Sands scenery is very marked. This is limestone and clay vale country where there is a traditional and aesthetically pleasing balance between the basic elements of lowland English landscape - thick winding hedges, many hedgerow oaks, tree-lined brooks, copses and larger blocks of broadleaved woodland. (Fig.21)



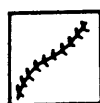
Fig. 21. Coker Hill Ridge

Ridges And Vales South And West of Yeovil

MAP 7



Region 5



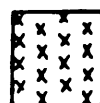
Railway Line



Main Road



Settlements



Ridges And Vales
South And West
of Yeovil

This landscape is much-loved by its parishioners and well described:

"The landscape is governed by three long ridges - rather like fingers - which stretch from east to west across the parish with shallow valleys in between. The result is a generally open area with magnificent extensive views from the higher ground. There are streams in the valleys, where the land is mainly pastoral, the small to medium-sized fields being bounded by hedges. The narrow lanes are also lined by tall, dense hedgerows. Generally, the environment is invigorating, and always interesting."

Hardington Parish Council (1991)

The most pleasing aspect of this zone is the way the hedge-pattern accentuates the land-form by rising up and over each ridge (Fig.21).

The field pattern at Hewingbere Down is, however, much more formal and clearly a creation of the surveyor's rod and chain.

The Exeter-Waterloo railway marks a frontier zone between Somerset and Dorset. Here the landscape seems to take on a rugged inhospitable appearance. Fields are carved out of the woodland which spills down off the hills, and minor roads become unsurfaced and infrequent, accentuating the frontier feeling. The area is ecologically rich and the great wooded dome of Pen Wood is a well loved land-mark. (Fig.22)

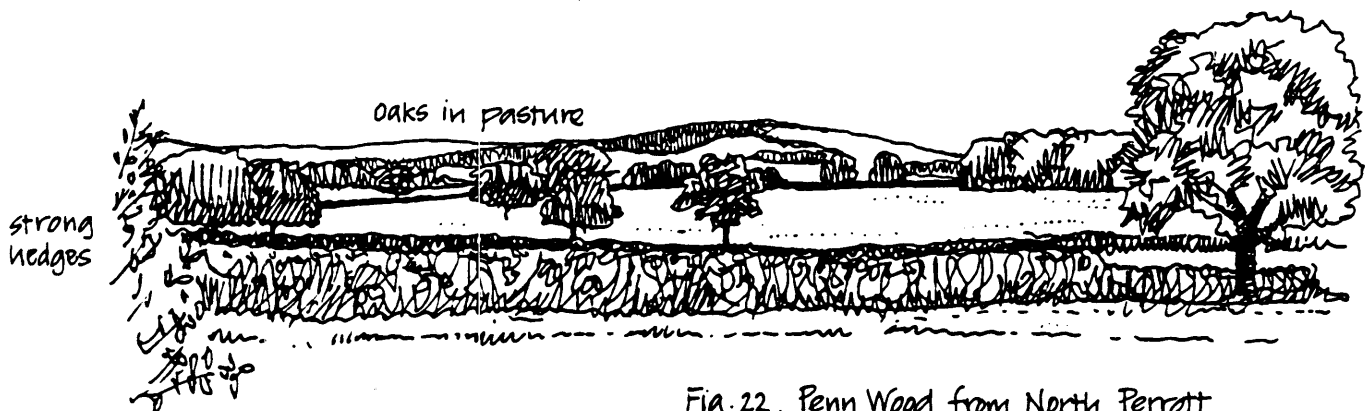


Fig.22. Penn Wood from North Perrott

The Settlements

This region has some attractive villages and dwellings and many architectural thatched stone cottages. The forest marble stone quarried near Halstock in Dorset by contrast with the Hamstone area gives a harder, grey appearance to valley settlements such as Closworth, Hardington Mandeville and East Coker.

ISSUES

Change in the Landscape

This area in the District is amongst the least changing and unspoilt. Its settlement pattern is more dispersed and remote than the Yeovil Sands region. The distinctive over-ridge fieldscape and natural wooded watercourse landscape is largely intact and unspoiled.

Matters of concern are the proliferation of large farm buildings on exposed ridge tops such as Coker Ridge and the future of broadleaved woodland in need of appropriate management and care.

VISUAL CHARACTER REGION 6

Escarpment Ridges and Vales East of Yeovil

Introduction

This area lies to the east of the Central Lower Lias plain (MAP 8, page 48). It is a distinctive crescent shaped series of ridges and vales which form part of a much greater geological formation which begins at Lyme Regis bay and extends hundreds of miles to the north.

The parishes which lie in this region are Castle Cary, Ansford, Bruton, Brewham, North Cadbury, Pitcombe, Shepton Montague, Charlton Musgrove, Penselwood, Cucklington, Stoke Trister, Wincanton, Bratton Seymour, Yarlinton, Compton Pauncefoot, Maperton, Holton, North Cheriton, South Cadbury, Corton Denham, Charlton Horethorne, Horsington, Abbas and Templecombe, Milborne Port and Henstridge.

The geology is a series of north-east to south-west aligned rock formations forming a succession of ridges or scarps, dip slopes and vales. To the north beyond a major fault line, the Mere Fault, coincident with the A303 at Leigh Common, the bands of rock become more complex in form, more convoluted and with a much more varied landform.

Settlement and Land-Use

The Wincanton area is one which has been well populated since late prehistoric times. The survival record of archaeological sites is quite good compared with the more heavily cultivated land to the west. But even here sites are concentrated on the hill-tops and marginal land such as the Selwood Forest area.

The larger settlements are located on the more benign gentle slopes and better drained soils of the oolitic limestones and Yeovil Sands. The Oxford Clays are particularly intractable and these areas are sparsely populated even today.

Prehistoric sites include Cadbury Castle - a scheduled ancient monument, and bronze age tumuli on Corton Hill. The region was also favoured by Anglo-Saxon settlement and there is a 7th century pagan cemetery at Hicknoll Slaits, Compton Pauncefoot. There are important Anglo-Saxon sites at Bruton, Milborne Port and South Cadbury. Selwood Forest became a medieval royal hunting forest and this discouraged settlement.

This area of Somerset was one in which the medieval open field system of farming was most firmly established and evidence in the form of strip lynchets form impressive earthworks on the steeper slopes at South Cadbury, Corton Denham, Bruton, Pitcombe and Shepton Montague. Written evidence is also derived from John Lelands travels. He described the countryside here in the 1540's as "al champagne but fruteful ground", champagne or champaign being the old term for open field cultivation.

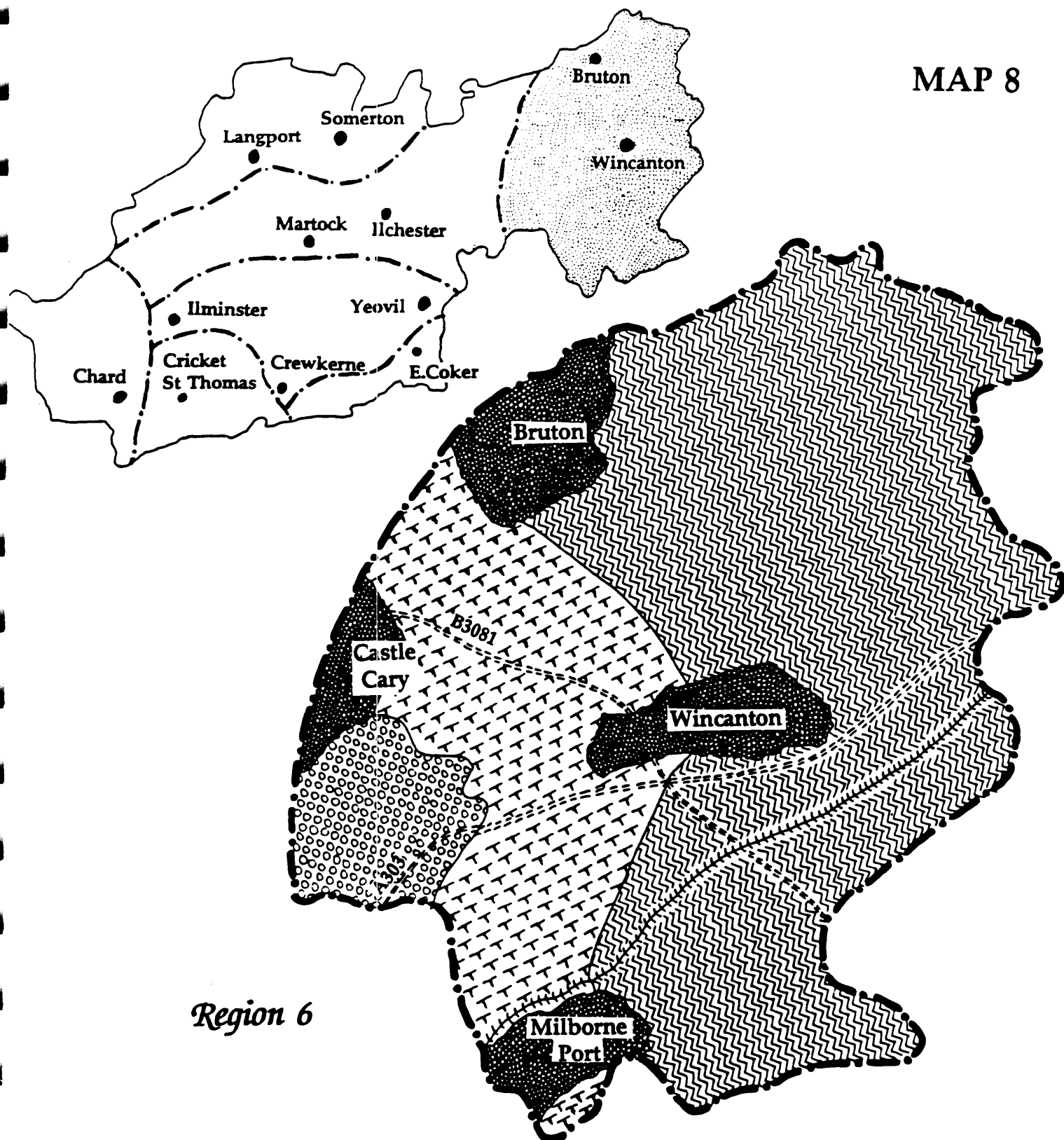
There is evidence in the area of abandoned or shrunken settlements during the economic misfortunes of the late middle ages. Maperton and Stowell are good examples.

There are also a number of high status sites where remain survive. These include 12th century castle sites at Ballonds Castle Penselwood, Cockroad Wood Charlton Musgrove and Castle Cary. There is a moated manor house at Marsh Court, Cucklington, and several hunting parks such as Stoke Trister, Mohun's Park and Ferset. Stavordale Priory and Bruton Abbey are important ecclesiastical sites.

Land-use today is predominantly pastoral with improved grass leys for silage. Dairy herds are on the less well drained soils in the clay vales and sheep grazing takes place on the unimproved steeper slopes. Arable land can be found in most areas but it is particularly concentrated on the easier slopes of the Yeovil sands or the oolitic limestone vale north of Charlton Horethorne to

Escarpments Ridges And Vales East of Yeovil

MAP 8



Region 6



Settlements



Main Road



Downland Coombes
And Holloways



Railway Line



Wooded Ridges
And Clay Vales



Lower Lias Clay Vales
Rivers And Flood Plains

Yarlington. There are some substantial blocks of woodland on the steeper slopes mostly mixed broadleaf and conifer. Management is somewhat erratic, particularly compared with the commercial forestry taking place on the high ridge of the Greensand at Brewham and Penselwood.

Wildlife

The area has a great number of sites of interest. This is probably because of the variable geology and topography which has not made intensive agriculture very easy. Habitats such as woodlands have survived over a long period of time and the many steep slopes continue to protect rich floras, particularly where traditional grassland management continues.

Many ancient woods have unfortunately succumbed to coniferisation, but the better examples include Cogley Wood, Bruton, which is an SSSI, North Side Wood and Inwood at Templecombe and Henstridge respectively, and Hanover Wood, Milborne Port.

Grassland sites are amongst the habitats most threatened by "improvement" but survivors can be found in this area. There are acidic grasslands on the Greensand near Penselwood, the neutral grasslands near Cucklington and North Brewham, and calcareous grassland on the limestone ridges. The best examples of this are at Cucklington. The Fullers Earth rock north of Milborne Port. The oolitic rocks around Milborne Wick and Pitcombe, and the sheep-grazed slopes around Corton Denham and South Cadbury.

Some of the District's best wildflower road verges can be found in the Blackmoor Vale where verges are sometimes meadows in themselves. These verges contain a mass of summer flowers such as hairy willowherb, vetches, fleabane, meadowsweet and umbellifers such as hemlock. They are usually excellent butterfly habitats supporting ringlet, grayling and meadow browns in profusion.

The quality of the hedges in this region is also to be commented on. The hedges on limestone can be plotted by the mass of old mans beard, and spindle and wayfaring tree are common throughout the region.

Despite the quality of the habitats there are remarkably few nature reserves or SSSIs. The lack of interest in this area may be more due to efforts being concentrated elsewhere, such as the Somerset Moors and Levels rather than a lack of quality. The Council's Local Nature Reserve at Penselwood is an exception to this rule.

The Blackmoor Vale may be one of the most underrated areas in the District for the quality of its flora and fauna.

This region is also particularly important for its geological SSSI's with some fine fossil bearing strata in the oolitic limestone exposures at Milborne Wick and the Fullers Earth rock at Bruton.

Landscape Character

Examined in more detail the escarpments, ridges and vales east of Yeovil can be divided into the following broad character zones within which can be identified a great diversity of local landscapes.

1. Downland, Coombes and Holloways
2. Wooded Ridges and Clay Vales
3. A303 Corridor
4. Settlements

1. DOWNLAND, COOMBES AND HOLLOWAYS

These landforms are part of the hill country which fringes the great central plain (character region 7) and extends from the Dorset borderland north-east to Castle Cary and Bruton.

These hills are formed from the Middle and Upper Lias family of rocks overlain with Inferior Oolite limestones. The rocks from the Upper Lias are the familiar Yeovil Sands and these, where exposed, give the characteristic land-forms and land-cover of coombe and hollow-way. The limestones cap the Yeovil Sands and fall away in a shallow eastward dip-slope, which is largely treeless and hedgeless presenting large fields with broad sweeping vistas of ripening cereals.

Where the slopes are steepest and soils are thin there are swards of flower-rich calcareous grassland, and many of the hills continue to be sheep-grazed thus maintaining this botanical interest. These largely treeless hills come close to the equivalent of the Dorset downs (Fig.23) and "display graceful feminine contours". (Newman 1986). In places grazing has relaxed sufficiently to allow scrub to develop, and breaks of slope, particularly at lynchets or boundaries, have thick cloaks of bracken and gorse.

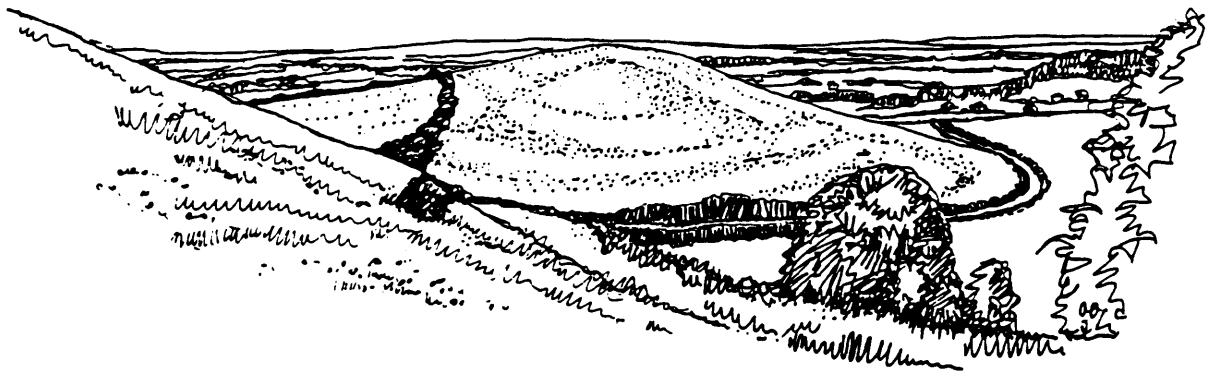


Fig. 23. Downland and Coombes at Parrock Hill, Corton Denham.

The oolitic plateau area between Bruton and Castle Cary displays particularly ancient signs of past cultivation in numerous strip lynchets (Fig.24). There are old drove roads and bridleways which create holloways. Locally distinctive are the hazel coppice hedges and numerous pollard ash trees and ridge top hedges which are now becoming overgrown and leggy. An unusual sight are the vineyards at Honeywick.

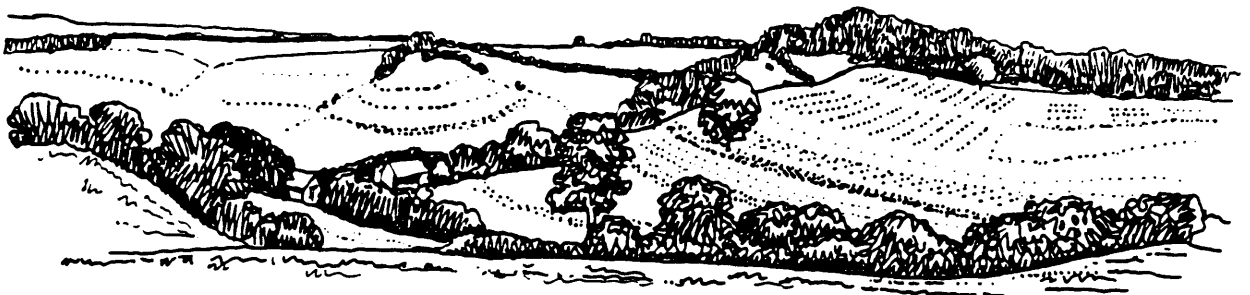


Fig. 24 Downland and coombes, Higher Hadspen

This is a landscape offering contrasts in light and shade-enclosed dark holloways and coombes and broad sunlit grassy vistas. It is an ancient landscape inviting exploration on foot.

2. WOODED RIDGES AND CLAY VALES

This character zone is an amalgam of the Fullers Earth Clay vales and ridges and the Forest Marble/Cornbrash ridge.

The landforms have more coherence in the south between Milborne Port and Maperton. North of this point the contours become very contorted due to considerable faulting of the underlying rocks.

The Fullers Earth give rise to low profile land-forms. A low ridge of Fullers Earth rocks cradles Milborne Port. This limestone ridge is remarkable for its wildlife habitat with herb-rich grassland containing stemless thistle and pyramidal orchard alongside semi-natural ancient woodland at Hanover Wood, Crendle Hill Wood and Everlanes Covert. This feature peters out near Stowell in the Fullers Earth clay vale which is distinguished by smaller pastoral fields often waterlogged with marshy reed and sedge filled ditches. Willow trees line the watercourses. Hedges are species rich and elm is regenerating well.

The main physical element in this character zone is the Forest Marble ridge which can be followed from the south to the north. The ridge is a west-facing escarpment with a long gently inclined dip slope terminated by the Cornbrash limestone itself forming an east-facing shallow scarp. This broad ridge is quite heavily wooded compared with the countryside to the west (Fig.25).



Fig. 25. Forest marble ridge at Maperton

There are some fine semi-natural ancient woodlands associated with the soils of these geological formations, notably Park Wood, Stoney Stoke and Cogley Wood, Bruton, (a Site of Special Scientific Interest). Hedges are of excellent quality containing spindle, wayfaring tree, clematis and many old oak trees. Elm is a significant returning component. Verges are extremely floristic with agrimony, hypericum and meadow cranesbill particularly eyecatching. Drainage is eastwards and the streams occupy their own heavily-wooded confining valleys. Fields are irregular shaped and pastoral and there is an ancient feel to the countryside.

Further to the east are the great Oxford Clay vales. Divided by the Mere Faultline each clay vale has a distinctive character but generally with the same floristic make-up. The Blackmoor Vale is one of the great topographical features of the District (Fig.26). Flat and poorly drained it has remained a landscape of little change since its enclosure from the Selwood Forest in the 17th and 18th century. Like Neroche Forest in the west, it was a result of Charles 1st's efforts to raise revenues. Leigh Common is one of the few remnants of the 1,100 acres of common which were not enclosed until the Parliamentary Acts of 1771 and 1821. The rectilinear hedge and field pattern south of Shaftesbury Lane may be a result of late enclosure.

Blackmoor Vale

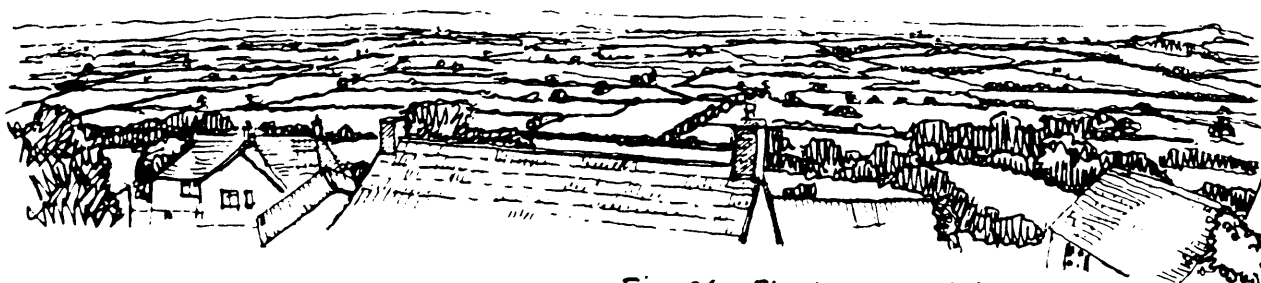


Fig. 26. Blackmore Vale
view from Cucklington

The Blackmoor Vale landscapes are some of the best lowland pastoral landscapes outside the Somerset Levels and Moors, and they are well-loved locally (Fig.26).

"The southern open vale with its large dairy herds is in contrast to the northern edge of the Parish which is attractively wooded along its higher ridges." (Stoke Trister Parish Council 1991)

The vale is notable for the quality of its hedged landscape, its flower filled droves and roadside verges and many aquatic habitats and marshy fields. There is a notable absence of settlement with few roads. The very wide verges may be due to the efforts of medieval carters to find a drier route across a winter quagmire.

The Oxford clays north of the Mere Fault are equally intractable and therefore pastoral in nature. However, influenced by the proximity of the Greensand ridge, the landscape is far more wooded. Numerous oaks spill down the slopes. Trees are located within fields as well as on the edges. Meadowland is uneven and hedges are few, replaced instead by linear bands of trees and woodland which snake down the slopes and protect several streams which have incised deep valleys, none more so that the infant Brue near Brewham (Fig.27).



Fig. 27. The Brue Valley. North Brewham

The Greensand ridge and steeper slopes overlooking Brewham and near Penselwood are thickly coniferised with dark blue/green trees giving a forbidding backdrop (Fig.28).

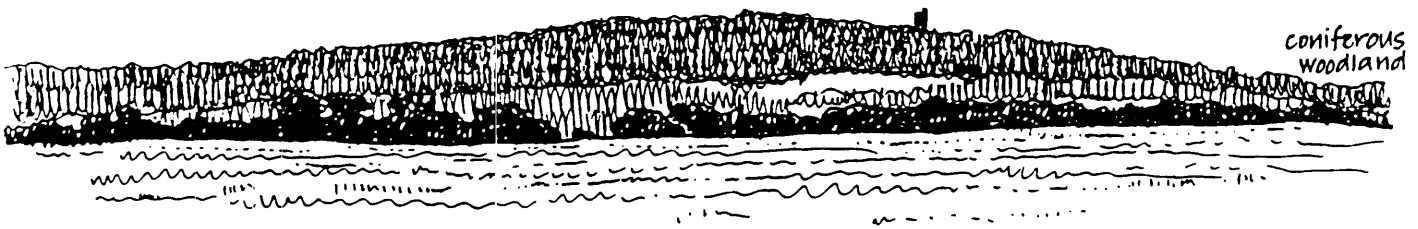


Fig. 28 Greensand Ridge - Alfred's Tower

3. A303 CORRIDOR

This important highway is situated on an east-west alignment which disrupts the continuity of the north-south geological and topographical "grain" of the landscape as it slices through the ridges creating huge cuttings.

Fortunately, unlike further west the route is not so disfigured by service stations or cafes.

The Mere to Wincanton improvement has caused severe disruption to the landscape of a particular sensitive location at the head of the Blackmore Vale, destroying part of an ancient common.

The landscaping of the older lengths of improved road is now beginning to make a welcome impact and what is particularly remarkable is the successful establishment of rich wildflower grassland. The cowslip show is particularly impressive, and orchids are known to have colonised the embankments.

4. THE SETTLEMENTS

The main form of settlement in the region is the nucleated village or hamlet, though there are a good number of scattered farmsteads.

The choice of building materials is very localised and reflects the geological complexity of the region.

In the west, Compton Pauncefoot, South Cadbury and Castle Cary make use of the warm yellow/brown sandstone associated with the Yeovil Sands formations. Further east Oolitic and Forest Marble limestones are commonly used, sometimes with brick detailing.

Wincanton is a more varied mixture of architectural styles, fashions and materials.

Many of the region's villages and towns seem to nestle into a ridge, "sheltering" from the east winds, often tree enclosed. Examples are Milborne Port, Charlton Horethorne, Corton Denham, Cucklington and Maperton.

ISSUES

Change in the Landscape

The most important elements in this landscape region are its high number of woods, remnant unimproved grassland and surviving historic landscapes and sites, all of which may be threatened.

The parish councils' responses showed concern for the core features of the landscape. The lack of management investment or insensitive management of hedges, woodlands and water courses was repeatedly mentioned. Overhead wires and ugly modern barns were another irritation.

All of these concerns are justified. Many woods and hedgerow trees are becoming senile. Ash die-back is a particularly noticeable problem on the limestone areas. Ash trees in the Castle Cary area were distinctively managed by pollarding. These trees are now well overdue for re-pollarding (Fig.29). Similarly many lanes are lined with ancient hazel and field maple stools long overdue for re-coppicing. Woodland in general is being left unthinned. Conifers need to be removed and replaced with broadleaves. In general more planting needs to be done for the future and opportunities taken to enlarge or link isolated woods together.



Fig.29. Characteristic old ash pollards. Castle Cary.

Undergrazing on steeper slopes is allowing scrub to encroach on flower-rich downland.

Hedges have been lost, particularly in the arable areas. The Brue valley north of Castle Cary and the Maperton area has particularly suffered.

Modern barns do spring up in the most prominent of locations. Examples are located at Milborne Wick, Pitcombe and Kingsettle Hill, Brewham.

The geology of the region has resulted in many hollows, concavities and old quarries. The disposal of waste, both licensed and unlicensed, is a constant threat to such features which often contain significant wildlife as well as landscape interest. Hillsides at Hadspen and elsewhere have become scarred by motorcycle scrambling.

Many of the area's historic and prehistoric monuments are in urgent need of protection, by legislation or by agreements, before they are lost.

VISUAL CHARACTER REGION 7

The Central Plain, Moors and River Basins

Introduction

This region consists of the large area of low lying clay lands framed between the escarpments of hills (MAP 9, page 56).

To understand the area it is convenient to divide it west and east of the Fosse Way. Parishes to the west are Tintinhull (part), Ash, Martock, Long Load, Kingsbury Episcopi, Long Sutton (part), Drayton (part), Isle Brewers, Isle Abbots, Puckington, Ilton, Beercrocombe, Barrington (part), and Hambridge. To the east lie Babcary, Lovington, Alford, North and South Barrow, Ilchester, Yeovilton, West Camel, Queen Camel, Sparkford, Limington, Chilton Cantelo, Marston Magna, Mudford and Rimpton.

This region is the least complex geologically, consisting of the Middle and Lower Lias series of clays, shales, silts and marls with the occasional deposit of ancient river gravels. Topographically the underlying rocks give a gentle landform, far from flat, with a series of rolling ridges and shallow vales through which water courses have deposited alluvium.

This apparently dull landscape does in fact have a variety of land-use and land-cover.

The rivers Isle, Parrett, Yeo, Cary and Brue snake their way creating broad corridors of pasture land before the anonymity imparted by the great grazing marshes.

Settlement and Land-use

Population densities are low and settlements confined to the better drained ridges and hillocks well placed to exploit marshland and better drained ridge soils.

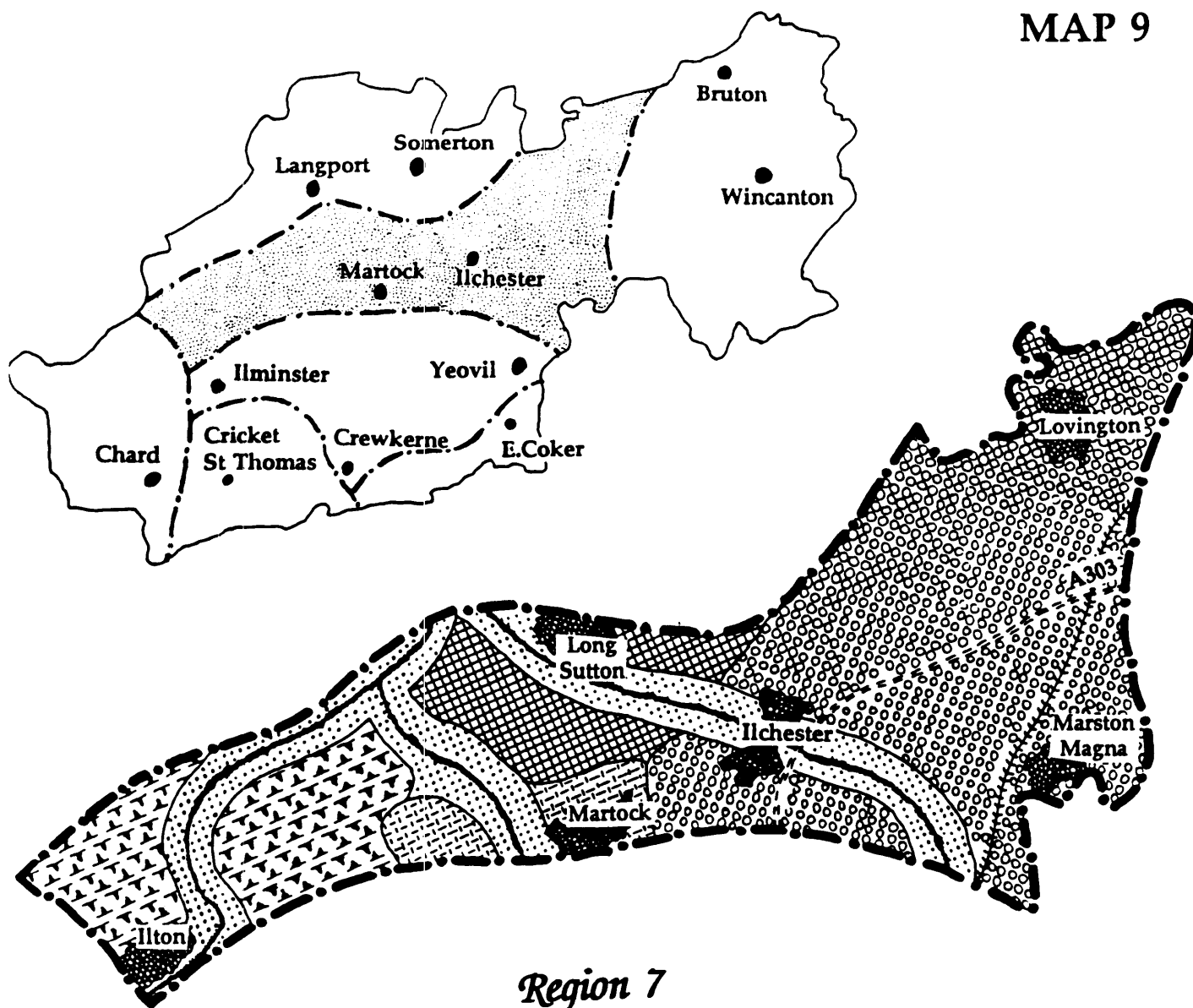
The land-use is mixed with large areas of arable on the ridges and "islands" giving way to permanent grassland in the river corridor floodplain and moors. This land-use was established when villages such as Martock, Kingsbury and Tintinhull expanded greatly, particularly in the 14th century. In the Domesday book Martock had only one entry but in succeeding centuries manorial records list no less than nine dependent settlements, Bower Hinton, Hurst, Newton, Coat, Stapleton, Ash, Witcombe, Milton and Long Load. This growth was based on the reclamation of land from the "waste" - enlarging the open fields and increasing productivity. The successful development of these high status settlements has to be contrasted with the decline of tens of other smaller settlements, many of which, like South Bradon near Puckington, are just farms today. The work of Mick Aston of Bristol University (1985) has identified an extraordinary number of deserted medieval villages in the Upper Yeo area of Mudford, Marston Magna and Limington. Today these villages and surrounding fields show many surviving earthworks of former streets, house platforms and ridge and furrow fields.

Particularly important in the great reclamation was the work of the monastic houses such as Muchelney Abbey. Despite drainage the Parrett, Isle and Yeo marshlands persisted and large floods can still occur to this day. Less investment was put into the drainage of the southern moors compared with the northern moors, but by the 19th century:

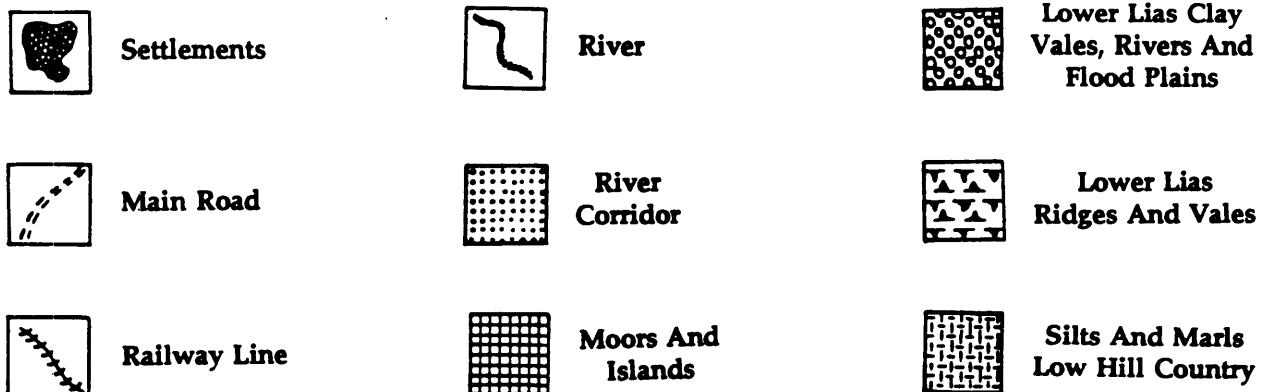
"the appearance of the landscape had altered beyond all recognition. A grid-iron of neat green pastures divided by rectangular drainage ditches, had replaced the former rough marshland, and the overgrown thickets of woodland had been replaced by rows of pollarded willows which run along the edges of the newly constructed roads." (Havinden 1981).

Central Plain, Moors And River Basins

MAP 9



Region 7



Wildlife

This lowland landscape, like that of parts of character region (4) is a productively farmed landscape in which there is little room for wildlife.

Soils, being broadly calcareous, support some rich floras, particularly in some field margins and road verges. Ditches and hedges are particularly important refuges and in summer they are often thick with hairy willowherb, meadowsweet, hemlock water dropwort and fleabane, attracting many insects and birds. Bab Cary Meadows SSSI is a fine surviving grassland and there are some good ancient woodlands at Ashington and Sparkford Wood SSSI.

The main focus of wildlife interest are the water courses, which, where unpolluted, contain rich assemblages of aquatic plants and water animal life. Herons, kingfishers and even otters are sighted. There is an important heronry at Midelney where one of the few woodlands are located. Good stocks of fish can be found throughout the Isle, Parrett and Yeo.

The "jewels in the crown" are the moors, designated Sites of Special Scientific Interest at Wet Moor and West Moor. These are extensive grazing marshes and ditch systems with rich flora and fauna particularly attracting duck and wading birds when winter flooding occurs.

Landscape Character

Examined in more detail the central lowlands can be divided into six character zones:

- (1) Lower Lias Ridges and Vales
- (2) Low Hill Country - Silts and Marls
- (3) Lower Lias Clay Vales, Rivers and Floodplain
- (4) Moors and Islands
- (5) The A303 road corridor
- (6) The settlements

1) LOWER LIAS RIDGES AND VALES

Lying mainly in Isle Abbots, Beercrocombe, Ilton and Hambridge, this is an attractive and distinctive landscape of shallow rolling ridges and vales and busy gravelly streams heavily lined with trees (Fig.30).

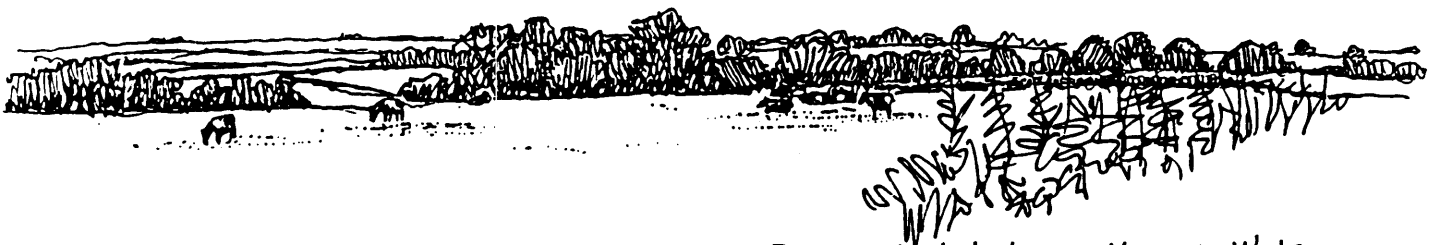


Fig.30. Wooded stream-Venner's Water

The Venners Water and Fivehead River from the Blackdown plateau cut into the lower lias clays and shales and give the landscape a strong, east-west directional force.

The landscape has an ancient feel with narrow winding lanes with unexpected surprises, hamlets, farms, railway bridges and fords. Glimpses of rows of great white willows can be caught through farm gates, otherwise the lanes are usually well below the surrounding fields

and hedges. The stockproof hedges are mainly elm, field maple, blackthorn and hazel. The elm is strongly regenerating, closing in the landscape once more. Most fields are down to permanent grass and contain Holstein or Friesian cattle. The better draining ridgeland is sometimes down to wheat. The former railway line and canal have become wooded landscape features crossing the natural grain of the countryside from north to south.

Lying to the east of the Isle Valley is a long low ridge of lower lias occupied by Hambridge and Westport. This area is a centre of apple production and agreeably clothed in hectares of apple trees. Earnhill Park occupies the north western flank of this ridge and its 18th century parkland landscape is highly valued with many fine oaks, chestnuts and small ornamental woods. To the south on the same low ridge is Walronds Park and Golden Hill Copse, a very large natural woodland and landscape feature. The landscape around Puckington is very open and arable, lacking in hedges or trees.

2) SILTS AND MARLS LOW HILL COUNTRY

This character zone is a continuation of the rolling arable landscape which lies between the Vale of Ilchester and the Yeovil Sands hill country described in Zone (4), encompassing the parishes of Ash, Martock, Long Load and Kingsbury Episcopi. It is a feature of low hills and weak escarpments fringing the moors and river corridors.

From Kingsbury Episcopi to West Lambrook is a low ridge which is the "core" of South Somerset apple country consisting of several large fruit farms. In addition most villages and some farms have ancient cider apple orchards often sheep grazed (Fig.31). Many orchards are fringed with distinctive poplar, alder, willow and birch windbreaks.



Fig. 31. Sheep and Orchards

Fields and roadsides are confined by elm hedges of some age and many fields down to permanent grass are often yellow with spring buttercups. Hurst and Madey Mills stream are pleasantly lined with willow and alder.

There are centres of arable production particularly south and west of Martock. Fields are large and some hedges weak and gappy with a few struggling trees.

3) LOWER LIAS CLAY VALES, RIVERS AND FLOOD PLAIN

This area is the most extensive of all the landscape character zones discussed here. It extends from the moors near Long Load north-east to the edge of the district at Bab Cary and south-east to Rimpton, encompassing the floodplains of the rivers Cary, Yeo and part of the Brue.

The geology and soils are perhaps more complex than first impressions suggest. Ancient river gravel and "head" deposits of sandy loams and limestone gravel create low undulations over the Lower Lias black bituminous shales of the low vales.

The area can be divided into two either side of the long low limestone ridge at Sparkford. This ridge is an outcrop of the rocks encountered in Zone (1) above. The ridge is quite wooded with many calcareous loving plants such as betony, agrimony and clematis.

North of the Sparkford ridge is a broad low vale encompassing the course of the river Cary. Parts of the vale have a distinctive and very rural character, particularly Cary Moor with its

attractive field pattern of splendid hedges and many old oaks lining droves and lanes (Fig.32). This area and north to Lovington and Alford is predominantly pastoral and unchanging. Many fields carry surviving ridge and furrow.

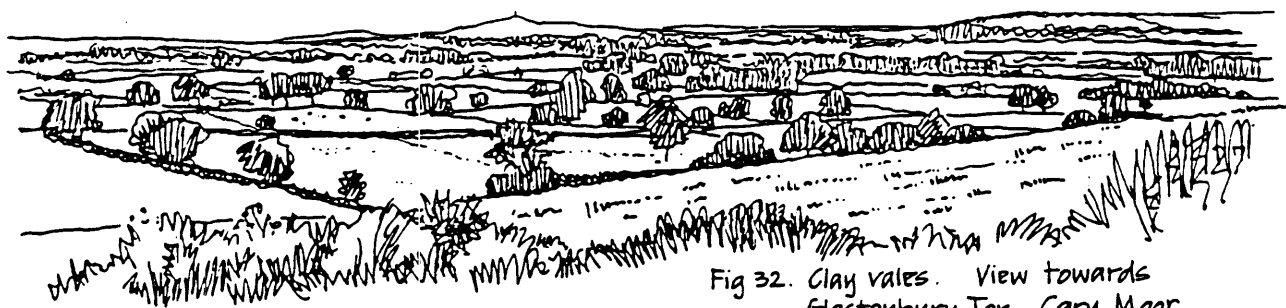


Fig 32. Clay vales. View towards Glastonbury Tor - Cary Moor

This great expanse is crossed by several watercourses, mostly well defined by alders and willows.

South of the Sparkford ridge lies the Vale of Ilchester. Another broad area of mixed farming, with arable mainly located on the slightly drier clay ridges or islands. Hedges are generally kept low and hedgerow trees are fairly infrequent.

The main visual features are the large settled "island" of Marston Magna and there are some significant blocks of woodland around Chilton Cantelo. The open 'feel' of the area is well described:

"From the south of the parish one is given a wide panoramic vista of the surrounding country, whilst in the centre of the village one is comforted with the feeling of homeliness and security." (Rimpton Parish Council 1991)

To the west the homogeneity of the clay vale landscape is interrupted by the great sea of concrete and outside scale of buildings at RNAS Yeovilton. The sound of revving aircraft is a constant intrusion.

Ilchester and to the west the landscape is overtly concerned with the need to keep dry. There are a great number of ditches and rhynes, often reed filled, and fewer hedges. The River Yeo has been straightened and embanked.

The rivers are amongst the most natural features in this heavily modified landscape. The Isle in the west close to the A303 flows north through flower-rich meadows, the river's location revealed by numerous alders and willows. On reaching the broad alluvial plain north of Beacon Hill Ilminster the course is lost amongst the huge arable expanse before rediscovery again in the traditional riverside meadows west of Golden Hill Copse, where huge white and crack willows survive.

The River Parrett is one of the most beautiful of lowland Somerset rivers, wholly natural in its appearance and meandering course. Between South Petherton and Thorney it is heavily defined by alders and willows and only in a few localities does arable land reach its banks. Disused but occupied mills are spaced along its banks (Fig.33). Most notably the Parrett Works mill chimney protrudes from amongst the willows. The river Yeo is also a very attractive, ecologically sound river, particularly in its Mudford-Ilchester stretch. It is alder and willow-lined with many lily-covered pools and thick stands of reed. West of Ilchester the river has

been tamed and enclosed by floodbanks anonymous within the expanse of grazing meadows of Kings Moor and Wet Moor.



Fig. 33. The Parrett Valley near Martock

4) THE MOORS AND ISLANDS

The rivers Parrett, Isle and Yeo flow onto the great flat expanses of grazing marsh in the parishes of Muchelney, Long Load, Huish Episcopi, Kingsbury Episcopi and Drayton. Lying almost at sea level these are great grassy vistas interrupted only by distant herds of cattle or the odd willow as far as the fringing low hills.

Using once again the Ministry of Agriculture ESA Landscape classification; Wet Moor, Hay Moor, Muchelney Level, Thorney Moor and South Moor are mainly category type A "Open Moor". Category Type B "Semi-Open Moor" is mainly West Moor as far as the Hambridge-Burrow road. This moor is particularly important for its number of osier beds supplying the basket industry of Kingsbury Episcopi and Thorney. This category of landscape is also found at West Moor east of Long Load, Witcombe Bottom near Ash, and south of the river Parrett at Langport. The category type D "Domesticated Moor", characterised by the more enclosed hedged landscape, is found from Muchelney south and east to Kingsbury and just south of Drayton.

Finally, "Hillocks" comprising mainly arable land and woodland are located at Midelney and Muchelney.

5) A303 CORRIDOR

The A303 trunk road is no ordinary highway. It has been up-graded along much of its route across South Somerset and it has become a spinal column of steel concrete and tarmac influencing land-use and scenery on its east-west trajectory (Fig. 34).

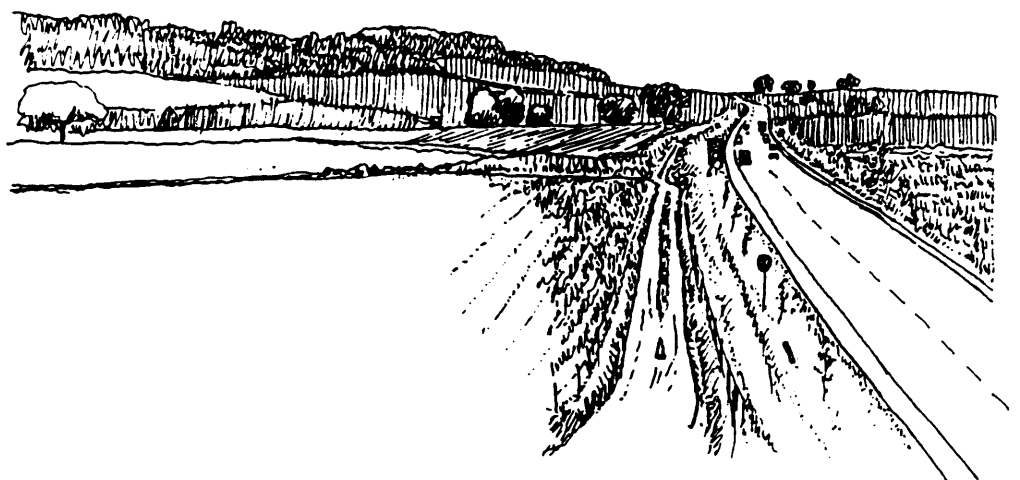


Fig. 34. A303 Whitelackington

The needs of travellers are met by development which has occurred at many intersections providing a commercial vernacular of plastic signs, glass and brick.

The influence of the road extends beyond the visual. The noise, particularly on its concrete sections, is carried miles down wind across the flat terrain.

Extensive landscaping has been carried out and a familiar sight are the kestrels hunting voles in the long rank grass.

6) SETTLEMENTS

Like landscape region (4) the area is remarkable for the quality of its vernacular architecture. Many of the more humble cottages like the grander homes have quality Hamstone detailing. There are a good number of medieval "hall" houses in villages such as Long Load (source SSAVBRG). Thatch is a commonly used roof material although pantile is the norm.

Many of the fringe valleys on the south side of the lias clay vales and moors have a pleasant mixture of Hamstone and blue or white lias stone.

The churches are often the most striking features in a lowland landscape:



Fig. 35 Kingsbury Episcopi Parish Church

"the towers of the parish churches were everywhere to be seen rising above fields and dwellings not even the wildest stretch of moorland, the most secluded valley or the deepest marsh were out of earshot of the church bells" Bettey (1988).

Particularly splendid church towers are located at Isle Abbots, Kingsbury Episcopi (Fig.35) and Martock.

Many settlements lie on islands or ridges of better-drained soils; on river gravel terraces or stretched out along ridge-top roads. In particular there is a long ribbon of development along the B3165 from West Lambrook to Thorney with buildings only separated by orchards or small fields.

ISSUES

Change in the Landscape

Considering the total landscape of the lias clays the main character features are the river corridors and tributary streams, the ancient hedge pattern, large expanses of grazing marsh, settled ridges and "islands", and the many hectares of apple trees that surround the village and farms. This landscape is well appreciated.

"the whole area is attractive, even picturesque in appearance and is both restful and invigorating". (Puckington Parish Meeting 1991)

There are, as ever, areas of concern which disfigure or threaten this landscape quality. RNAS Yeovilton, Merryfield airfield and the South Bradon glass houses can be eye-catching features when looked down on from surrounding high land.

Parish Council concerns include the proliferation of overhead wires, the loss of orchards, hedges, woods and willows through conversion to arable or the more subtle process of gradual neglect and decay. Hedges on some roadsides continue to be poorly managed and some, like at Knighton Drove off Barrington Broadway destroyed completely, emphasising the lack of protection for ancient droves and hedges.

Willows are the archetypal tree of lowland Somerset and many are old pollards. Local Authority efforts have re-pollarded many fine stretches of roadside willows, but unfortunately many privately owned willows continue to be of concern. Perrymoor rhyne on the Huish Episcopi/Muchelney parish boundary and the Madey Mill/Hurst Brook, Martock willows and on the river Yeo at Hinton and Ilchester are prime examples in urgent need of pollarding.

Orchards are also a major worry. The continual decline of the Somerset orchard is a weakening of local distinctiveness. Again local authority efforts have resulted in some good replanting schemes.

Finally, the great core of rural tranquillity and wildlife sanctuary lies in the moors. Proposals to open these up to recreation, by revived river navigation or cycleways will, however benign, compromise this peace and seclusion by introducing noise and movement.

FUTURE LANDSCAPES - DEVELOPING A LANDSCAPE STRATEGY FOR SOUTH SOMERSET

This report confirms the rich variety of landscape character and constituent features which comprise South Somerset. Acknowledging their value and recognising the threats are the first important steps in meeting the challenge of change.

Features which are particularly vulnerable include hedges and hedgerow trees, woodlands, orchards and parklands. There is widespread concern amongst parish councils at the loss of identity, sense of place and the urbanisation of the countryside.

There is also a lot of good management practice by farmers and land-owners, traditional rural management skills like hedgelaying are experiencing a revival of interest; pollarding of willows and orchard planting is encouraged and the take up of grants is very high.

The success of many such projects needs to be made more widespread and co-ordinated throughout the countryside. This can only be done by careful targeting of the limited resources. As most land is in private ownership progress can only be made by persuasion, co-operation and incentives. This landscape assessment is the first-step in directing the resources available to maximum effect. The next step will be to devise a landscape strategy tailor made to the unique circumstances of South Somerset and its diverse and attractive countryside.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

Landscape Assessment

A Summary of Parish Responses

LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT - A SUMMARY OF PARISH RESPONSES

INTRODUCTION

Rural landscapes mean different things to different people. People's perceptions of the countryside are important in shaping their use of the land. Indeed the question of one's image of the countryside has received royal attention:

'To the farmers and foresters it is a source of income; to the extractor of minerals it is a part of an industrial process; to builders and manufacturers it is a place for houses and factories; to the transport industry it is a place to build roads, canals, railways, airports and harbours; to the energy industry it is a place for power stations, dams and refineries; to the leisure industry it is a place for sport and recreation; to the casual visitor it is all too often a place to drop rubbish before going home; to wild animals and plants it is home' (Duke of Edinburgh cited in Blunden & Turner 1985.)

In this context, it is imperative to gain an understanding of local peoples' perceptions of the landscape in their parish. Thus, as part of the Landscape Assessment a questionnaire was compiled in order to ascertain peoples' opinions of the landscape of South Somerset (a sample of which is attached). In this way it has been possible to utilize the local knowledge of Parish Councils to identify important characteristics and features of the landscape through the eyes of residents. This report summarises the responses received from the Parish Council questionnaires which were returned (see figure 1).

Each Parish Council took a different approach to the completion of the questionnaire. Some made a combined effort at a Parish Council meeting to provide a consensus response to the questions. Others nominated a representative, or representatives to undertake its completion. Some of the questionnaires were completed as an end in itself. Other Parish Councils were stimulated to compose essays to describe their landscape.

SECTION I

The initial questions concentrated on the selection of words which could be used to describe the landscape. (Figures 2 - 4 illustrate the various responses for each parish. Where more than one form was returned per parish, and different words were selected, then the majority selection is indicated. Where these did not appear to be a clear majority then a combined selection is indicated.)

It is evident that the majority of parishes considered the wildlife value of their area to be either good or excellent. Only one parish had a poor opinion of the wildlife value of their area.

Of all the questions asked, that on 'scale' caused the most confusion amongst respondents, and very often conflicting answers were given.

Most respondents considered their landscape to be either complex, diverse or a combination of the two. Similarly in terms of stimulus a good proportion of parishes were considered to be attractive, picturesque or a combination of the two. Only one parish considered its landscape to be boring.

SECTION II

All of the questionnaires returned indicated landscape features of which the parish was proud including hills, views, streams and rivers, woods, buildings and footpaths. However these features which engendered such pride, were also the subject of some concern. As one respondent pointed to the inadequate management and even blockage of some footpaths: 'it should not be necessary to take wire cutters and a machete for a walk in the country!'

SECTION III

Overhead power lines, agricultural buildings (described by one respondent as a rash of tin sheds), derelict buildings and the A303 trunk road were all cited as features which detract from the value of the landscape. Indeed one respondent asked if the Council could have the mini-motorway (A303) removed! Other concerns centred on a general watering down of the 'sense of place' by modern developments, and the large numbers of heavy lorries travelling through small villages.

SECTIONS IV AND VI

Many parishes identified landscape areas which required careful and sensitive management, particularly hedgerows, streams and wooded areas. Furthermore opportunities for tree planting were identified by about half of the respondents.

SECTION V

Cultural and literary associations with the parishes were evident in some of the returns including a quote from the Spanish Ambassador in 1620:

'From the fortress by Montacute can be seen one of the finest views in Europe.'

Other questionnaires indicated personalities with parish connections including Parson Woodford, King Charles I, and local authors.

CONCLUSION

The completion of questionnaires allowed Parish Councils an opportunity to identify what is distinctive about their locality. As such the completed forms provided a valuable insight into those features of which people are proud, and those features parish members dislike.

If we are to successfully and sensitively manage change within the landscape of South Somerset, this assessment and the questionnaire provide a vital first step in determining what is important to local people. The questionnaire will provide a valuable contribution in formulating positive strategies, designed to direct scarce resources to parishes where treasured landscape features may deteriorate.

LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT

Introduction

What is Landscape Assessment

"South Somerset rounded hills and welcoming landscapes, hedgerows freckled with flowers in spring, golden hamstone villages, quiet waterways, intimate towns and glorious country houses"

This is the description of the countryside in the Council's official tourist guide. Apart from this and similar examples, no deeper analysis has been attempted in identifying the basic elements which make the landscape of South Somerset so interesting to visitor and resident alike.

The Council has decided to proceed with an in-depth study for a number of reasons. Primarily an analysis of the landscape will help the Council to protect the character of the countryside by preparing planning policies to conserve its essential features and resist damaging changes. Positive strategies can be produced which direct scarce resources to particular parts of the District where action is needed to reverse the deterioration of a valued landscape or feature.

Your Council's help is needed because of its local knowledge and understanding of what are the most important characteristics and features of the parish. You are invited to use the attached questionnaire to stimulate discussion. Please also use the maps to illustrate your answers and comments.

If you need clarification, more maps or questionnaires please contact the Countryside Officer, Peter Smith, on Yeovil 75272 extension 3233.

QUESTIONNAIRE

- (1) How would you describe the landscape in your parish?

Pastoral

Arable

Wooded

Wildlife value - poor, moderate, good, excellent

Scale - enclosed, open, exposed

Variety - uniform, simple, diverse, complex

Stimulus - boring, monotonous, pretty, attractive, picturesque, invigorating

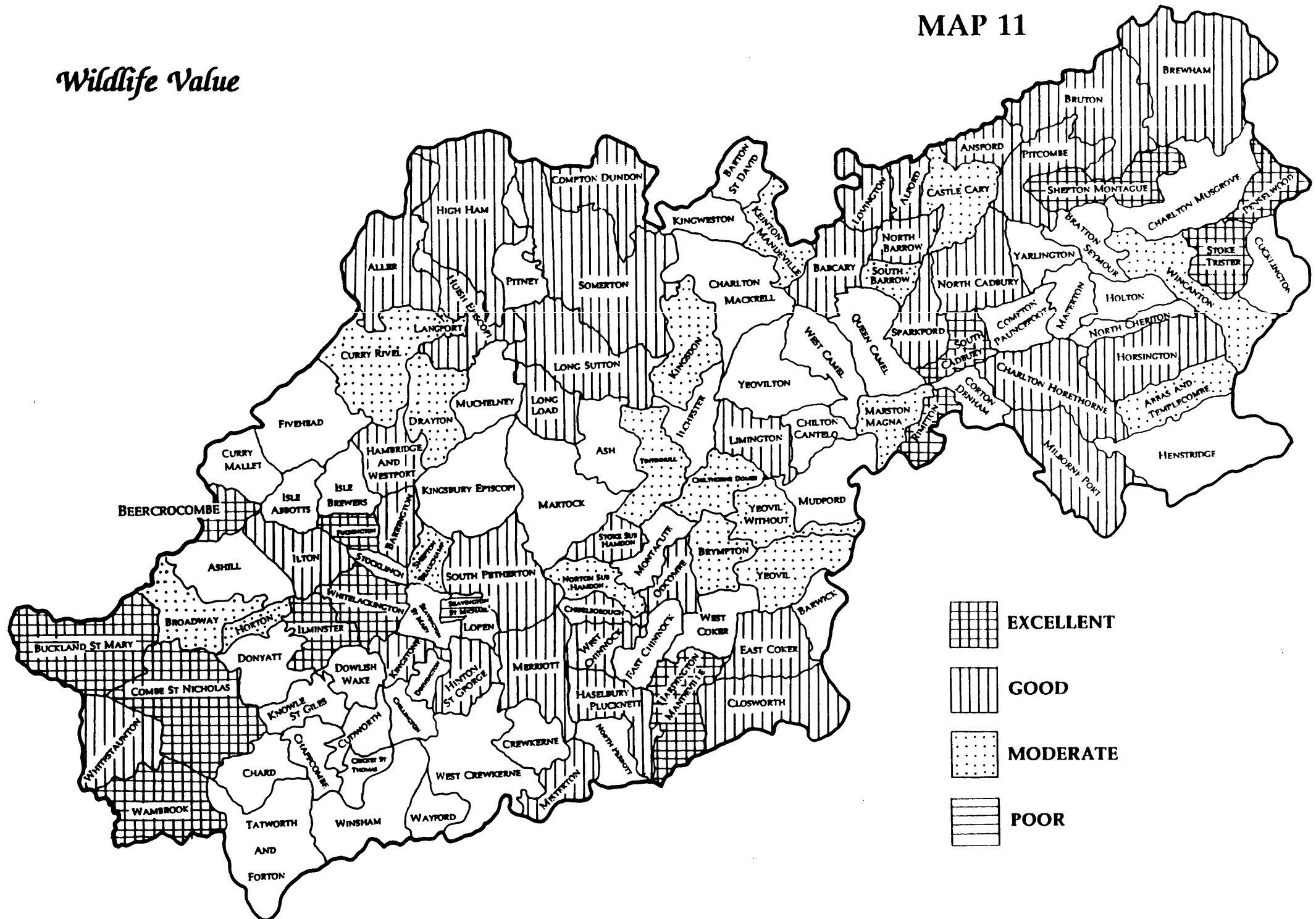
Other descriptions

- (2) Are there any features or elements in your parish landscape of which you are particularly proud? i.e. woods, hills, landmarks, views.
- (3) What features or elements detract from the appearance of the countryside? i.e. overhead lines, derelict buildings.
- (4) Are there any features or elements which if not managed may be lost? i.e. woods, meadows, walls, follies, hedges, pollards.
- (5) Are there any literary or artistic connections with your parish landscape?
- (6) Please identify any tree planting opportunities on private or public land.

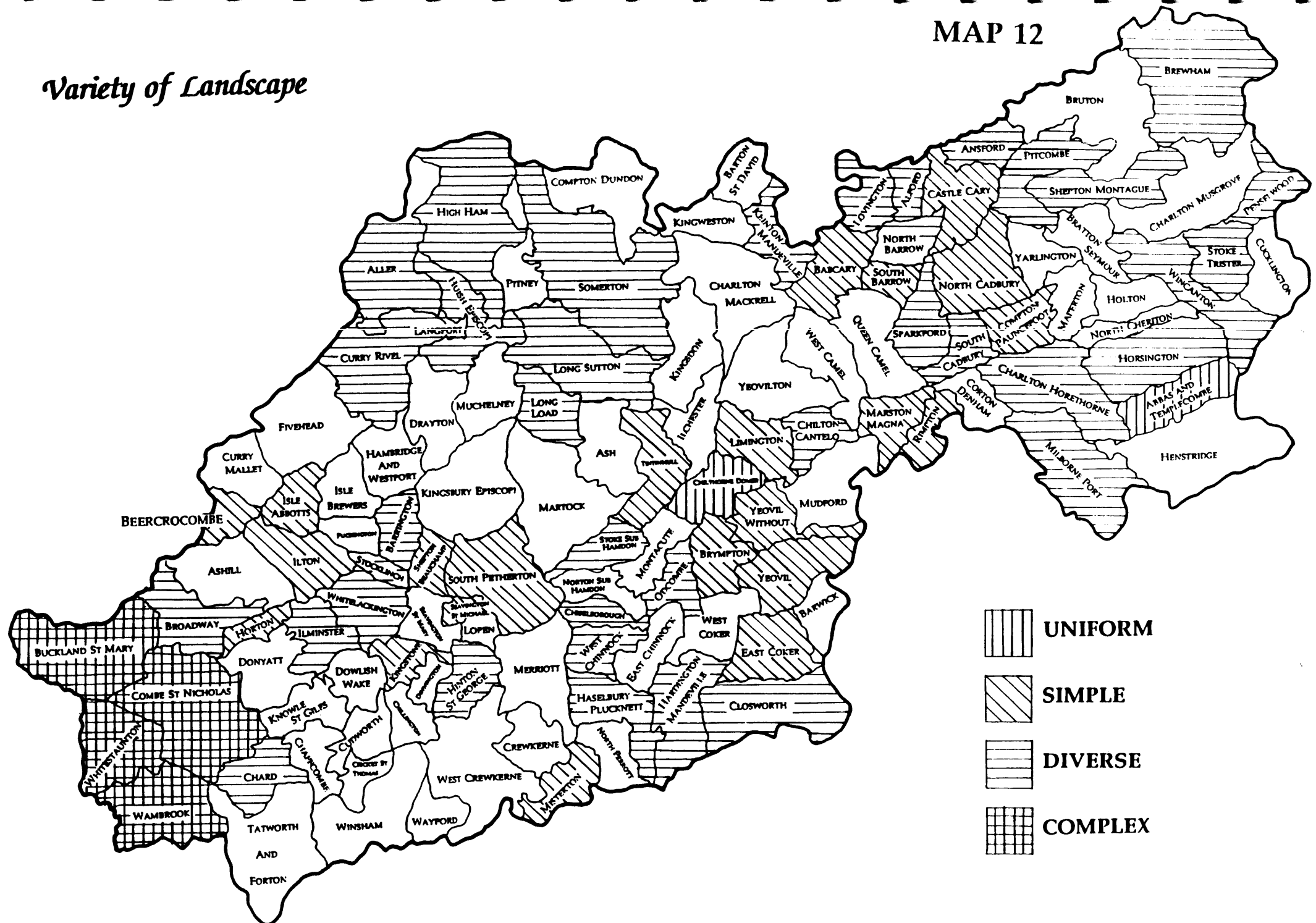
Parish Response

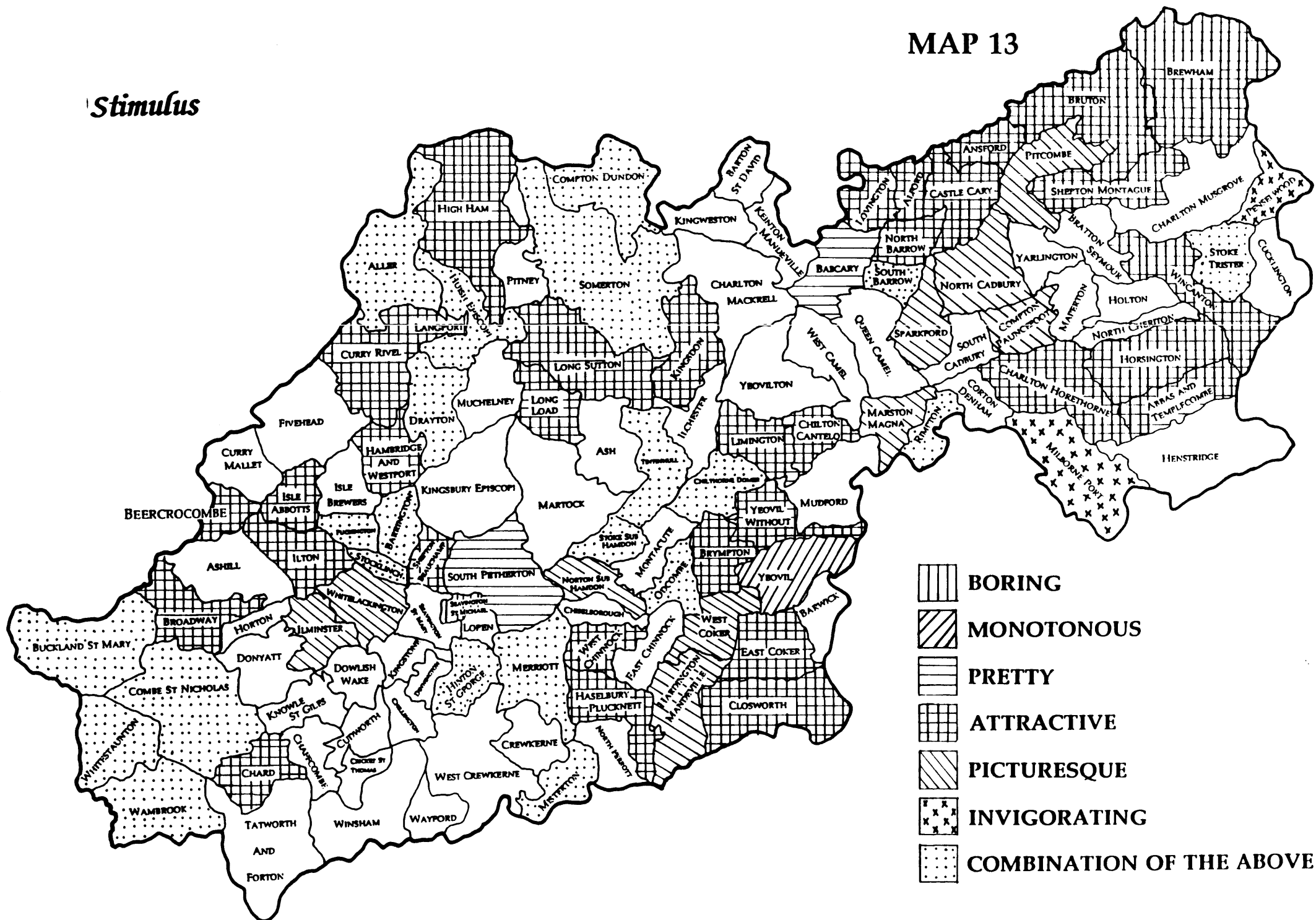


Wildlife Value



Variety of Landscape





APPENDIX 2

Supplementary Study

Yeovil Landscape Strategy

LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT

SUPPLEMENTARY STUDY - YEOVIL LANDSCAPE STRATEGY

Introduction

The setting and appearance of Yeovil was assessed from various vantage points around the fringe and notes made on:

- 1) the main areas of mature trees in and around the town;
- 2) landscape units and features;
- 3) areas which may require comprehensive landscape design "treatment".

Synopsis

Yeovil is situated on a shallow dip slope of the Yeovil Sands at the point where the river Yeo breaks through the southern escarpment.

The southern escarpment is a natural barrier to Yeovil spreading southwards except to the west where it becomes less severe and buildings spill over onto the dip slope towards East Coker.

The effect viewed from the west is of the greater part of the built up area cradled by the wooded escarpment. The river Yeo forms a natural barrier to eastwards expansion.

The edge of Yeovil to the north is defined by residential development at the top of a shallow northern escarpment formed of the Pennard Sands. The scarp drops down into the mixed farmland of the Vale of Ilchester and Yeovil Marsh.

Roads which cross these escarpments cut deep into the sandy rocks exposing unvegetated rock faces, in dramatic hollow-ways overhung by precariously lodged trees and ferns. The best example is Newton Road.

Westwards the edge of Yeovil consists of a mixture of recent residential and commercial development which adjoins farmland and parkland.

The Westlands airfield forces a great grassland wedge into the heart of Yeovil.

Within the town itself there are enclaves of tall mature trees which create important skyline features which break up the monotony of rooflines. These trees are often associated with the older parts of Yeovil or large public developments such as schools or hospitals.

Detailed Analysis

Beginning in the south, the southern wooded escarpment is perhaps the most striking landscape feature of Yeovil. Large areas are apparently unbroken by development and consist of great stands of mature trees of oak, ash, chestnut and sycamore. These link up with the specimen trees of the designed landscapes associated with Newton Surmaville, Barwick and Aldon Parks of which Ninesprings public open space forms a picturesque part. Waterside landscapes are significant here; small springs have created the characteristic wooded goyles, and these link with the meandering alder lined river Yeo. This whole area

is extremely important for quiet recreation. The golf course does not detract from this atmosphere apart from some unfortunate uniform lines of conifers.

To the west the escarpments become lower and the woodland is more fragmented. Buildings spill over the skyline onto West Coker Road and the dip slope to the south towards East Coker. The "edge" of Yeovil in this south-western corner is quite well defined and has matured with fine specimen trees and good hedges. The approach from West Coker on the A30 is very attractive with mature oaks and new planting.

To the east the escarpment drops down to a shallow valley of agricultural land. Here the edge of development is not very well defined other than by busy roads. Buildings are generally large, modern and relate poorly one to another. The parish boundary stream occupying the valley has been engineered into anonymity having been straightened and trees removed.

Roadside hedges on Bunford Lane have been removed or are in a poor state of management.

The new A3088 between the Hamstone road bridge and including the roundabout has not been landscaped and does not give a particularly attractive approach to the outskirts of Yeovil.

Some of the most prominent trees in this north-west quarter of the town can be found associated with the old settlements of Alvington and Lufton and also at the Cemetery. These trees give a pleasant wooded edge to this part of the town and help to screen the industrial estate.

Unfortunately some of the older parts of the Lufton industrial estate have not been well landscaped or subsequently maintained, perhaps a consequence of the recession. The more recent retail warehouse and supermarket developments have been lavishly landscaped, but in general this high standard is the exception rather than the rule.

To the north the landscape is unspoilt, small pastoral fields confined by good hedges and trees. Viewed from the southern scarp the area forms part of the skyline and it is therefore very important that existing views are retained. Thorne Lane has been upgraded in highway but not in landscape terms. Hedges have been removed and replaced by municipal post and rail. New hedges are thin or have been failed; new tree planting is virtually absent. Urban street lights contrast harshly with the rural landscape which surrounds them.

Further into open countryside the scarp has a number of woodlands, hollow-ways and wooded goyles; the most notable being Longcroft.

The skyline east of the hundred stone viewed from Mudford is dominated by houses whose aspects benefit from the view across the vale.

In the north-east corner of these suburbs, Lyde Road is a good example of a well landscaped outer ring road and should be the model for Western Avenue and Thorne Lane. The residential edge to open farmland is however far from satisfactory with a mixture of hedge, larch-lap and other fencing.

This eastern side of Yeovil is a jumble of sewerage infrastructure, overhead wires, industrial estate storage yards and arable land which does not present an attractive aspect viewed from the approach to the town by the A30. The river is in places well defined by large poplar stands but this theme peters out northwards.

APPENDIX 3
Sample Orchard Survey

LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT - ORCHARD SURVEY

Introduction

An orchard survey was undertaken as part of the Landscape Assessment of South Somerset. Orchards are an important historical, cultural and physical feature of the South Somerset landscape, which required closer scrutiny. The intention of the survey was to track the extent of orchard areas throughout the twentieth century. This exercise was undertaken by using old Ordinance Survey map evidence to examine a variety of parishes within South Somerset. (The parishes surveyed have been chosen to represent the varied landscape of South Somerset and are illustrated in Appendix I). Information regarding the present day state of orchard areas was collected on site during November and December of 1992. As a result of the site inspections it has been possible to record, in general terms the present state of remaining orchards. Furthermore, it has been possible to record the land use which has replaced the orchards which have been grubbed out for alternative uses.

The results of the orchard survey are contained within Tables I and II in the Appendices. Examination of Table I indicates that within the majority of parishes surveyed, orchard area loss in recent decades has been dramatic. In parishes such as Shepton Beauchamp and Chaffcombe the amount of remaining orchard is tiny. Indeed most other parishes have witnessed orchard areas being halved, if not quartered. Survey results in both North Perrott and Norton Sub-Hamdon did not conform to these trends because commercial fruit farming is still undertaken. As a result orchard areas have seen wide fluctuations in these parishes.

The majority of orchard areas lost have reverted to other forms of agricultural use, and in particular to pasture. Informal evidence from landowners suggests that the orchards which have gone were very old, and had suffered damage during gales. However the reasons why replanting has not been undertaken have not been investigated.

If the total loss of orchard areas gives rise for concern, that concern must be heightened when considering the condition of those orchards which remain. The majority of remaining orchards are of old trees (65%) with derelict trees forming almost ten per cent of the remaining areas.

ORCHARD SURVEY

TABLE I

PARISH	HECTARES 1903 (1930)	HECTARES 1974-76 (1966)	HECTARES 1992
BARRINGTON	29.237 ha	15.169 ha	11.985 ha
BROADWAY	32.03 ha	(15.17 ha)	4.34 ha
SHEPTON BEAUCHAMP	21.86 ha	3.302 ha	0.801 ha
NORTON SUB- HAMDON	15.24 ha	57.493 ha	18.483 ha
SOUTH PETHERTON	72.59 ha	41.5 ha	22.2 ha
KEINTON MANDEVILLE	(38.34 ha)	24.619 ha	11.411 ha
CASTLE CARY	(54.72 ha)	18.776 ha	7.923 ha
NORTH PERROTT	14.68 ha	38.636 ha	18.619

NB: FIGURES IN BRACKETS RELATE TO DIFFERING MAP DATE AS ABOVE

ORCHARD SURVEY

TABLE II

PARISH	(1966) ORCHARD LOSS BETWEEN 1976 AND 1992		CONDITION OF REMAINING ORCHARDS		
	to agriculture	to development	New	Old (but well managed)	Dereli ct
BARRINGTON	3.184 ha	Nil	Nil	10.198	1.787
BROADWAY	(9.67 ha)	(1.16 ha)	Nil	3.63	0.71
SHEPTON BEAUCHAMP	1.976 ha	0.525 ha	Nil	0.801	Nil
NORTON SUB- HAMDON	37.255 ha	1.203 ha	18.246	Nil	0.237
SOUTH PETHERTON	15.193 ha	4.107 ha	3.834	17.615	0.751
KEINTON MANDEVILLE	9.658 ha	3.55 ha	Nil	8.313	3.098
CASTLE CARY	11.219 ha	Nil	Nil	5.043	2.88
NORTH PERROTT	20.017 ha	NIL	17.451 ha	0.833 ha	0.336 ha

NB FIGURES IN BRACKETS RELATE TO DIFFERING MAP DATE AS ABOVE

SAMPLE ORCHARD SURVEY - ACCOMPANYING NOTES

- TABLE I - Norton sub Hamdon showed heavy variations because of the activities of Norton Fruit Farm. In the majority of parishes orchard areas have more than halved between 1903 and 1992.
- TABLE II - The majority of orchard loss has been to agriculture. Remaining orchards tend to be old, or derelict.

APPENDIX 4

Sample Landscape Appraisal

Checklist

LANDSCAPE APPRAISAL CHECKLIST

(adapted from Countryside Commission/Open University methodology)

Project SSIX h. Assess. Surveyor Peter Smith
 Date 14 June 1992 Weather cloudy bright
 Viewpoint No. A30/Wanbrook Rd Photographs Yes.
 Looking west/S.West

DESCRIPTION : GENERAL IMPRESSIONS

An undulating landscape with quite level plateau tops. Well drained down to grass. Well defined field boundaries - embanked species rich some hedges quite o-grown. Mixed farming. Traditional farming area showing agricultural improvement without too great a loss of features

LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS

Elements/Features

	Type	Condition
Aquatic	none apparent	
Trees/woodlands	hedge trees, small woods	
Hedges	embanked hedges	hedges trimmed tight
Other boundaries		
Fields	large regular on ridge - irregular smaller in valleys	
Structures/artifacts	farm buildings	
Archaeology	none apparent	
Cultural		
<u>Views</u>		
Extent	fairly close horizon 2-3 miles	
Character	ridge top trees	
<u>Ecology</u>		
Habitats/communities	mainly hedges/banks	
Species	wood sage in hedge	
Diversity	low/medium diversity	
<u>Geology</u>		
Rocks	Green sand	
Landform	dissected plateau	
Soils	fringing	

* present
 ** significant
 *** dominant

Zones

Landform

flat
 rolling
 undulating
 steep
 vertical

plain
 rolling/lowland
 plateau
 hills
 crags

escarpment
 broad valley
 narrow valley

Land Cover

built-up
 road
 industry
 mineral working

horticulture/fruit
 arable *
 pasture ley ***
 moor

deciduous wood
 coniferous wood *
 mixed wood
 parkland

marsh
 river
 stream
 reservoir

Landscape Elements

farm buildings (modern) **
 farm buildings (vernacular) *
 churches/cemeteries
 ruins
 masts, poles
 pylons
 car park

walls
 fences
 hedges ***
 banks ***
 woodland **
 shelterbelt
 tree clumps *

hedgerow trees *
 scrub
 river/scrub
 pond
 canal
 footpath
 track (animal)

road *
 railway
 other

SUBJECTIVE CHECKLIST

SCALE: intimate
 ENCLOSURE: light
 VARIETY: uniform
 HARMONY: harmonious
 MOVEMENT: dead
 TEXTURE: smooth
 COLOUR: monochrome
 SECURITY: comfortable
 STIMULUS: boring
 PLEASURE: offensive

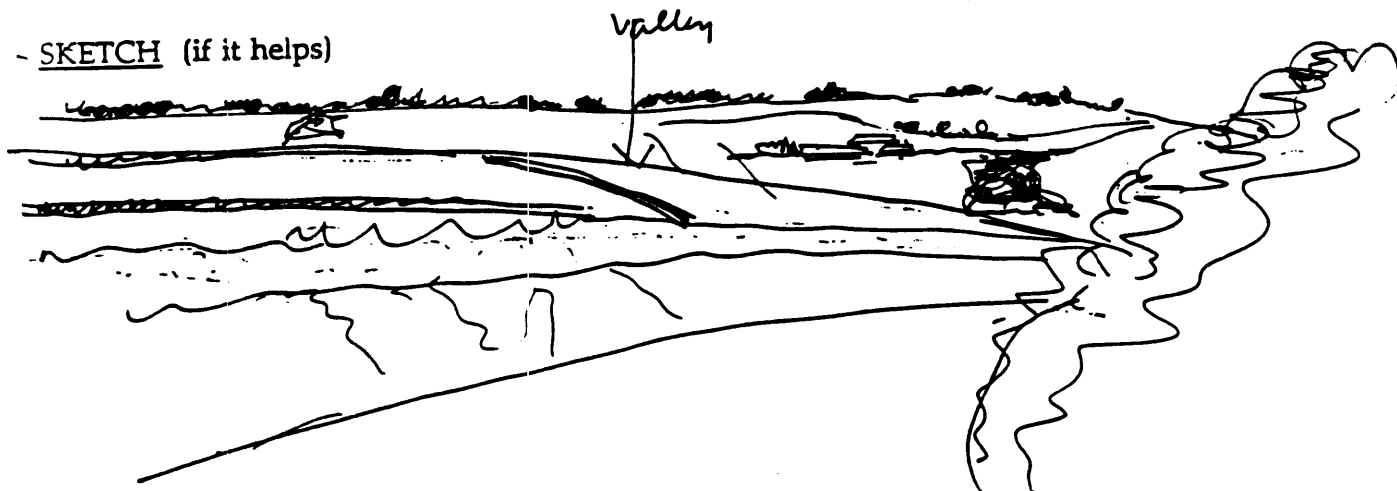
small
 enclosed
 simple
 balanced
 calm
 managed
 muted
 safe
 bland
 unpleasant

medium

large
 open
 varied
 discordant
 busy
 rough
 colourful
 unsettling
 interesting
 pleasant

vast
 exposed
 complex
 chaos
 frantic
 wild
 garish
 threatening
 invigorating
 beautiful

- SKETCH (if it helps)



APPENDIX 5

Ancient and Semi-natural Woodlands in South Somerset

ANCIENT AND SEMI-NATURAL WOODLANDS IN SOUTH SOMERSET

(A summary report of the findings of a study conducted by English Nature (Nature Conservancy Council for England) in 1989)

Ancient and semi-natural woodland areas included within the study were those believed to originate before 1600, and in some special cases, woodland areas were included where they could be dated post 1600, but pre 1900. The survey considered all woods of 2 hectares or more.

Within South Somerset 121 ancient or semi-natural woodland areas were recorded, their sizes ranging from 1 hectare to 210 hectares. The total area of this type of woodland cover in 1989 was 1652 hectares. The distribution of these woodland areas within the district is shown on the map provided. There is a definite concentration in both western and eastern parishes (these concentration correspond with the Blackdown Hills ANOB, and the west Wiltshire and Cranborne Chase ANOB).

Details of the previous extent of ancient woodland cover indicate that 88 hectares have been lost since 1600. These losses were mainly caused by the grubbing out of woodland areas for agricultural purposes, although 3 hectares was lost to urban land uses. (In the case of one example, where 7 hectares of ancient woodland have been lost at Rodgrove Copse in Wincanton parish, planning files from 1959 refer to 'scrub land which has recently been cleared' (49593). In addition there is a statement by M.A.F.F. that 'the clearing of this land by the applicant may well be a practical and useful contribution to agriculture'. The loss of this ancient copse is particularly sad because of its location in the River Cale basin where woodland areas are almost non-existent).

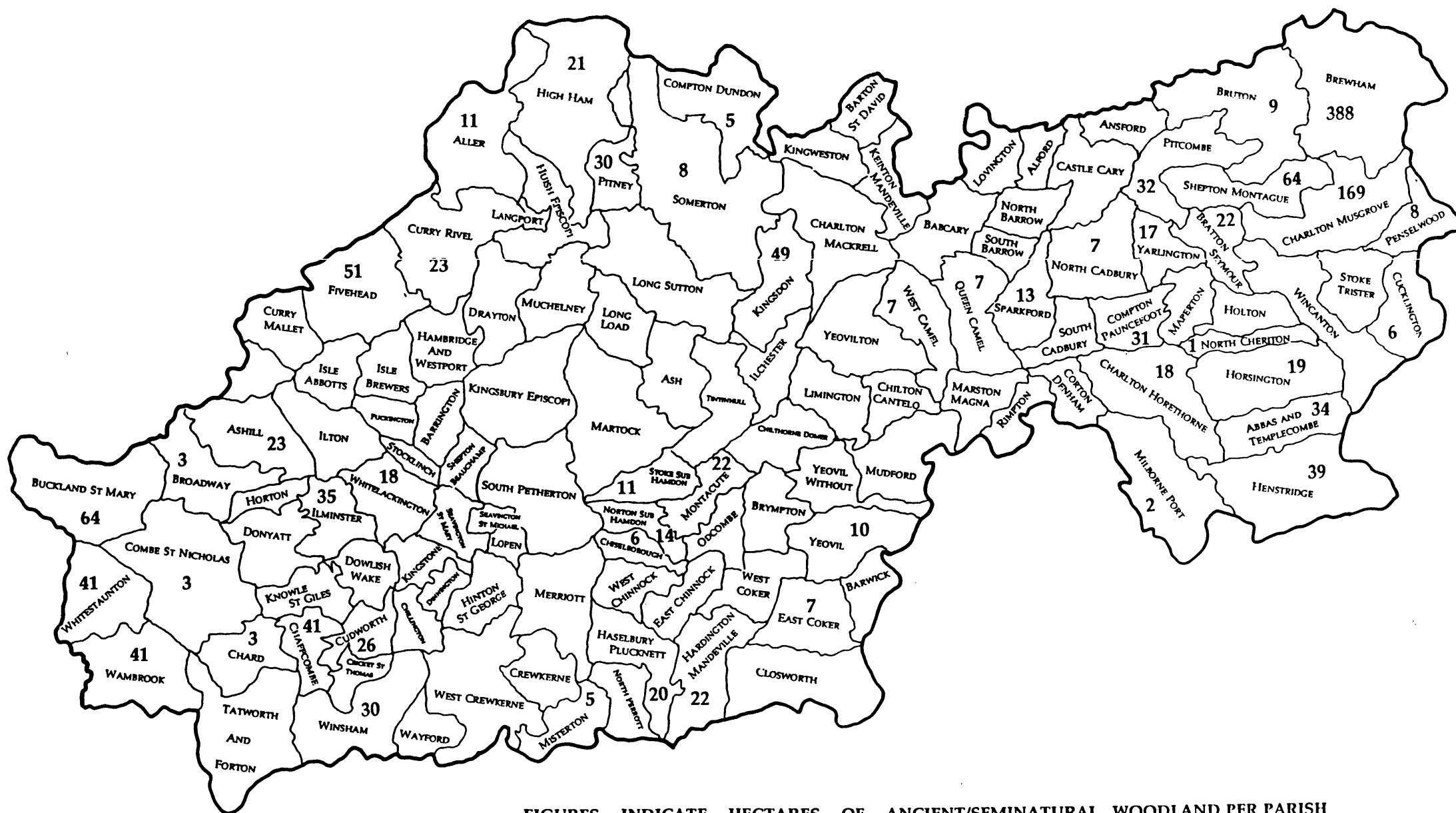
Whilst the majority of ancient woodland areas remain, the condition of these ancient woodlands has dramatically altered. The study indicates that 778 hectares have been converted to plantation woodland, in effect leaving only half of the original ancient or semi-natural woodland intact.

Finally, those ancient woodlands with some formal nature conservation status are listed below:-

Site Name	Parish	Site Area	Designation
Aller/Breech woods	High Ham/Aller	40 hectares	SSSI, STNC Res. (Part)
Beerwood	High Ham	9 hectares	SSSI
Dundon Beaconwood	Compton Dundon	5 hectares	STNC Res.
Sparkford wood	Sparkford	8 hectares	SSSI (Part)

Abbreviations: SSSI - Site of Special Scientific Interest
STNC Res.- Somerset Trust for Nature Conservation Reserve
ANOB - Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
MAFF - Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food

Source: Somerset Inventory of Ancient and Semi-Natural Woodlands 31/7/89
compiled by English Nature (S.W. Region) Nature Conservancy
Council for England.



FIGURES INDICATE HECTARES OF ANCIENT/SEMINATURAL WOODLAND PER PARISH

APPENDIX 6

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