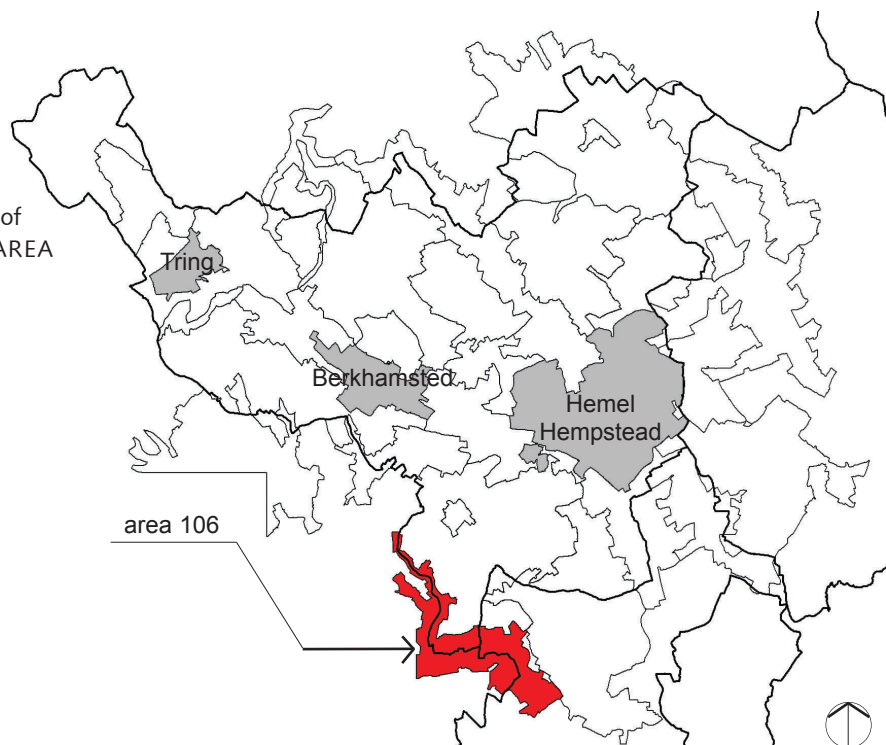


District Map showing location of LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREA

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LOCATION

North west of the M25 and Rickmansworth and running up towards Chesham as far as Latimer. The area straddles the county boundary with Buckinghamshire. The narrow dry tributary valley of Flaunden Bottom runs northwards from Latimer village.

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

The main valley reads very clearly with a strong sense of visual unity and historical continuity. The Chess is a shallow fast flowing river which still retains active watercress beds by the ford at the Chenies road. The associated meadows and wet woodlands are essentially intact. The valley slopes are steep with interlocking woodlands providing strong visual enclosure. Historic parklands of Goldingtons and Latimer add diversity to the character. The valley is a peaceful, intimate and largely harmonious landscape. The narrow dry valley of Flaunden Bottom has a more remote feel and is characterized by mixed open farmland with areas of sheep grazing.



KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- high quality chalk river flowing through a narrow valley floor with species rich water meadows
- small parklands on slopes and valley floor at Goldingtons and Latimer
- interlocking mixed woodlands along valley providing visual containment
- some good hedges to slopes, but neglected fences and hedges to valley floor and along Flaunden Bottom
- scattered/dispersed settlement along the Chess valley, remote and empty along Flaunden Bottom
- good range of vernacular building styles and built forms including mill houses

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

- medieval strip lynchets to Goldingtons estate
- Sarratt Bottom watercress beds
- mill houses, chases and fords
- modest flint churches on the plateau edge at Sarratt and Flaunden
- relic parkland trees
- lime works/quarry at Flaunden Bottom
- Chess Valley Walk

- Sarratt Bottom watercress beds (A. Tempany)

PHYSICAL INFLUENCES

Geology and soils. The general geology of the area comprises Upper and Middle Chalk, deeply dissected by post-glacial river/stream systems. Superficial deposits of clay-with-flints on the upper slopes lead to moderately acidic, free-draining brown earths on the plateau margins, and provide peri-glacial hill-wash deposits on lower slopes (Marlow association). Chalk outcrops on the valley sides (Coombe association) are numerous, giving localized calcareous woodland and grassland habitats. The valley floor of the Chess is occupied by thin post-glacial alluvial deposits of gravel and peaty loam, (Frome association).

Topography. A narrow, steep sided valley, with the floodplain of the River Chess forming the base. The dry coombe at Flaunden Bottom was formed from peri-glacial outwash erosion. The abrupt break in the upper valley slopes mark the outcrop of the underlying Chalk.

Degree of slope. Typically between 1 in 6 and 1 in 8 to the slopes of the Chess Valley and up to 1 in 5 on the slopes of Flaunden Bottom.

Altitude range. 135- 63m within the Chess valley and 83-140m at Flaunden Bottom.

Hydrology. As in all the Chilterns dip-slope valleys, the hydrology is controlled by ground water tables. The River Chess is a classic fast flowing chalk stream with rich water and biological quality. Habitat features such as gravel riffles and deeper pools and glides typify the river within the character area. The river is supported by numerous major and minor springs along its length, such as at Mount Wood. The water is strongly calcareous and poor in nutrients. There are associated tributaries, millstreams and actively managed watercress beds at Sarratt. The river is dammed at Latimer to form a mere.

Land cover and land use. The landcover can be described as wooded farmland, (particularly the part within Dacorum). Typically large arable fields to the valley slopes enclosed by woodland. To other areas there are smaller fields of pasture with well hedged enclosure e.g. around Moor Lane. The parklands at Latimer and Goldingtons are a distinctive land use of the valley with their specimen trees and roundels. The valley floor is primarily flood plain meadows which support seasonal grazing pasture between fragmented woodland cover. Within Flaunden Bottom woodland is concentrated to the upper slopes and grazing is a notable feature.

Vegetation and wildlife. Semi-natural woodland is extensive on valley slopes, consisting of calcareous beech/ash woodlands on the more chalky soils; with dry acidic/neutral oak/beech/ash woodlands with frequent holly on the thin clay-with-flints soils of plateau margins. Alder and willow woodland formerly dominated the valley floor.

There are significant remaining examples of semi-natural woodland including Limeshill Wood/Bramble Croft, Hanginglane Wood and parts of Mount Wood, within the Chess Valley; and Long Wood and Simon Deans Wood within Flaunden Bottom. The margins of Baldwins Wood also support important remnants of beech woodland. The only remaining valley-floor woodland is at the lower end of

Limeshill Wood, although remnant alders and pollarded crack willows are characteristic of stretches of the River Chess, notably at Chenies Bottom. Secondary willow woodland at the south-east end of the valley is locally valuable, (outside Dacorum).

Chalk grasslands would always have been limited to chalk outcrops. Remaining examples include the south and west facing margins of Baldwins and Long Woods; and the calcareous grassland on old lynchets below Church End, Sarratt. Remnants of chalk grassland flora also persist at Flaunden Chalk Pit. Alluvial meadows are more widespread, if under threat. Examples include Frogmore Meadow, Sarratt Bottom Meadow, and meadows at Valley Farm, Sarratt, as well as wet meadows east of Mount Wood in Buckinghamshire.

Semi-natural wetlands only occur where spring sources exist, or by the River Chess itself. The wetlands at Frogmore Meadows, Sarratt Bottom and Valley Farm Meadows are especially important. Elsewhere small areas of natural seepage fen are locally important, such as at Chenies Bridge. The highly modified springs at Sarratt Cress Beds are important for some birds.

Important flora in the area includes the only site in Hertfordshire for Narrow-leaved Bittercress at Limeshill Wood; the nationally scarce Coral-root Bittercress in a number of woods; Fly Orchids and the declining Chiltern Gentian at Flaunden Bottom; and a range of scarce flora at Frogmore Meadow.

Notable fauna includes self-sustaining populations of natural brown trout, which are becoming an increasingly rare and important species associated with chalk streams. Other species include kingfisher, snipe and water vole in the valley floor wetlands; and dormouse on valley slope woodlands.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

The historic and cultural pattern in the Chess Valley is still strongly in evidence. Medieval (12-14th century) crop terracing/earthworks, or strip lynchets are clearly visible on the northern slope near Goldingtons. As a clean, fast flowing river, the Chess historically provided ideal conditions for the cultivation of watercress. Watercress beds were once common and extensive throughout the valley and some of the last active beds in the county survive in the valley at Sarratt Bottom. The historic pattern of grazing in the floodplain meadows also continues to this day. A number of mill houses (one of which dates from the Roman period), mill streams and weirs survive at Sarratt and Latimer, however they are no longer active.

Several estates have clearly influenced the landscape character, namely Goldingtons and Latimer Park.

Goldingtons is a once extensive estate centred around a large early Georgian (possibly earlier) stucco country house with steeply sloping gardens to the south. The exotics and parkland planting in the grounds are influential in defining the skyline. A number of monumental parkland oak, ash and roundels survive on the slopes to the north of the river. Latimer Park is rather more extensive. The house is largely Victorian Tudor Revival, with numerous associated estate

buildings and grazed parkland with fine parkland trees, including both broadleaf and exotic species. Another trace of the historical and cultural pattern is the scant ruins of Flaunden's 13th Century Church alongside the River Chess. **Field Patterns.** There is a mixed pattern of enclosure within the valley. To the slopes areas of organic pre 18th century fields remain alongside 20th century enclosure and some larger scale prairie fields, however the latter are mainly contained by interlocking woodland. To the valley floor and the parkland landscapes there is a more open and unenclosed character. Where present hedges are medium in height, elsewhere metal estate and post and wire fencing is common. Flaunden Bottom has a more open character with few hedges and post and wire/timber fencing.

Transport pattern. Most of the roads in the area are rural and minor in character generally running across the valley. Verges are typically narrow or absent and some of the lanes are sunken to the upper slopes. The B road from Chenies to Chesham follows the valley to the west of the area and the eastern boundary is partly marked by the M25.

Settlements and built form. Settlement is mainly influenced by, and affiliated to, the estates. It is generally quite dispersed, comprising scattered farms and houses. Properties display a range of vernacular building styles from the 17th to 19th centuries, including an attractive mill house at Chenies Bottom.

At Sarratt End, most of the settlement is clustered on the plateau edge around the entrance to Goldingtons and the ancient flint church. Here a row of attractive red brick almshouses (1821) survive. On the valley floor there are number of flint faced cottages originally forming part of the Goldingtons estate, as well as a number of fine half timber and brick houses. Latimer is a small village set around a picturesque triangular village green at the entrance to Latimer Park. There is an eclectic and interesting range of vernacular cottages combining; half timber with pegs and brick infill, red clay tiles, tile hanging and diamond pane leaded windows. The 13th century church of Flaunden, now ruined, lies in the flood plain amid undergrowth east

of Latimer.

OTHER SOURCES OF AREA-SPECIFIC INFORMATION

English Nature : SSSI notifications
 Pevsner: Hertfordshire - The Buildings of England
 Environment Agency: The Chess & Misbourne Fact File (Ref TH-9/99-2.5K-D-BELA" Sept 1999)
 HCC, AONB and Environment Agency- Historic Environment Character Study (2001- available in the County SMR)

- Goldingtons and medieval crop terracing (A.Tempany)



VISUAL AND SENSORY PERCEPTION

The valley is largely concealed from the wider landscape. Within the valley views are often filtered and framed by woodland and landform. Unlike most of the other valleys through the Chilterns there are no major arterial roads or railways. Although some of the features including the parklands appear to be in poor condition, by virtue of over mature trees and poor condition fencing, there is still a cohesive character to the valley. The varied habitats along the river are most pleasing and these features combine to create a peaceful and tranquil atmosphere. Flaunden Bottom is a coherent landscape but it does not share the fuller range of characteristic features of the main Chess Valley.

Rarity and distinctiveness. Chalk streams are an internationally rare habitat. Within the Hertfordshire section of the Chilterns they include the Ver, Bulbourne, Gade and Chess. Of these the Chess is the best holistic example of a chalk stream in the county based on the whole corridor. The Chess Valley landscape is also rare within the county.

VISUAL IMPACT

The area is notable for the lack of detracting features. Most built features are vernacular in style and sympathetic in scale which add to the harmonious character. There is some inappropriate conifer planting, particularly at the pumping station in the valley. The M25 is intermittently visible/audible to the east. Within Flaunden Bottom the electricity pylons and entrance to the lime works/quarry are locally intrusive.

ACCESSIBILITY

There is a reasonable network of rights of way. The Chess Valley Walk, which follows the floodplain is a popular way-marked route. There is however a lack of places to park within the valley to enable wider access on foot.

COMMUNITY VIEWS

This area includes some distinctive features from a Hertfordshire perspective (D).

"The Chess Valley is the sole, outstanding example of how special the major Chiltern valleys can be when they are unspoilt by transport links and have a flowing chalk stream," from The Chilterns Landscape (CCP 392), Countryside Commission, 1992 page 44.

LANDSCAPE RELATED DESIGNATIONS

AONB (part)

SSSI: Frogmore Meadows (Three Rivers District)

SSSI: Sarratt Bottom (Three Rivers District)

Latimer Conservation Area (Buckinghamshire)e)

CONDITION

| | |
|---|------------------|
| <i>Land cover change:</i> | localized |
| <i>Age structure of tree cover:</i> | moderate |
| <i>Extent of semi-natural habitat survival:</i> | linked |
| <i>Management of semi-natural habitat:</i> | good |
| <i>Survival of cultural pattern:</i> | intact |
| <i>Impact of built development:</i> | low |
| <i>Impact of land-use change:</i> | low |

STRENGTH OF CHARACTER

| | |
|------------------------------------|------------------|
| <i>Impact of landform:</i> | prominent |
| <i>Impact of land cover:</i> | prominent |
| <i>Impact of historic pattern:</i> | apparent |
| <i>Visibility from outside:</i> | concealed |
| <i>Sense of enclosure:</i> | contained |
| <i>Visual unity:</i> | unified |
| <i>Distinctiveness/rarity:</i> | rare |

| | | | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| CONDITION | GOOD | Strengthen and reinforce | Conserve and strengthen | Safeguard and manage |
| | MODERATE | Improve and reinforce | Improve and conserve | Conserve and restore |
| | POOR | Reconstruct | Improve and restore | Restore condition to maintain character |
| | | WEAK | MODERATE | STRONG |
| STRENGTH OF CHARACTER | | | | |

STRATEGY AND GUIDELINES FOR MANAGING**CHANGE: SAFEGUARD AND MANAGE**

- promote the retention of the character of local minor roads by the management of hedgerows, hedgebanks and verges. Where part of a hedge has been damaged or removed it should be replanted with a mix of indigenous species
- support a strategy to restrict built development either within or adjacent to the area that would adversely affect the distinctive character of the valley
- encourage the retention of the existing pattern of hedges and to create new features to further enhance landscape and ecological links between woodlands. To include the promotion of hedgerows in place of post and wire fencing to roadside boundaries in Flaunden Bottom where hedges formed the traditional boundary
- promote the retention and restoration of the historic parklands, including Goldingtons and Latimer, through a range of initiatives including; tree planting and renewal of metal estate fencing etc.
- support the traditional management of flood plain meadows habitats through seasonal flooding and pasture
- encourage the retention and possible expansion of watercress beds
- encourage the removal of alien conifer species within the flood plain
- monitor the condition and quality of the chalk streams and springs to maintain landscape and biodiversity value
- control proposals to change the existing pattern of agricultural land use to other uses such as golf courses which would undermine the distinctive character of the landscape
- conserve and enhance the distinctive character of traditional settlements and individual buildings by promoting the conservation of important buildings and high standards of new building or alterations to existing properties, all with the consistent use of locally traditional materials and designed to reflect the traditional character of the area
- promote the reversal to large prairie fields where this weakens the contained and enclosed character of the valley
- promote the appropriate management of woodland in order to conserve and where absent to re-establish a rich ground flora and the distinction between different management systems, such as high forest and coppice with standards
- promote hedgerow restoration and creation throughout the area to provide visual and ecological links between existing and proposed woodland areas. Pattern to follow historic field boundaries where possible
- promote the planting of native species suitable with the prevailing conditions, to include alder and willow to the floodplain
- promote the creation of buffer zones between intensive arable production and important semi-natural habitats and the creation of links between semi-natural habitats
- conserve unimproved and semi-improved grassland wherever possible including at Goldingtons, avoiding agricultural improvements to reduce their calcareous nature, in order to maintain their nature conservation value. Encourage traditional management by grazing
- explore options to provide enhanced public access within the valley and to relieve localized parking problems by providing adequate facilities
- explore opportunities to further mitigate the impact of the M25
- ensure that local highway improvements are sympathetic to the scale, pattern and character of the existing road network
- promote awareness and consideration of the setting of the AONB, and views to and from it, when considering development and land use change proposals on sites adjacent to the AONB
- River Chess from Chenies Bottom (J.Billingsley)

