

# Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme

## *Landscape Character Assessment*

Final Report

*February 2019*



COOKSON & TICKNER

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE



## **Acknowledgements**

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# Executive Summary

The Quantock Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) was the first AONB to be designated in England (1956) and was confirmed as having AONB status in 1957. Small in scale but immense in character, the Quantock Hills is a unique environment of diverse landscape scene; from heathland hills with plunging combes, dense coniferous forests, rolling farmland valleys with picturesque red sandstone villages, striking escarpment, internationally significant Jurassic coastline, sessile oak woodland, prominent country houses with designed parkland, and gentle agricultural foothills that provide a transition to the lower lying, surrounding landscapes, of the Vale of Taunton Deane and the levels and moors.

This Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) builds on the Draft LCA prepared by the Quantock Hills AONB Service, which has been reviewed, updated and extended to include a wider geographical area, beyond the AONB boundary, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Quantock character through consideration of the landscape setting to the Hills. This wider area has been defined to ensure the landscapes sitting beyond the designated area, which share many of the same combination of elements, features and characteristics as the AONB, are taken into account as part of a bigger picture. These landscapes are also greatly influenced by their proximity to, and immediate views of, the prominent hill and ridge landform of the AONB such that they feel inherently 'Quantock' in character – perceptually part of the Quantock Hills landscape.

This LCA maps and describes the character and condition of the 12 Landscape Character Types within the Study Area namely: River Valley and Agricultural Fringe, Agricultural Fringe to Coast, Arable Plateaux, Enclosed Wooded Combes, Forested Hills and Combes, Heathland Hills and Combes, Lowland Hills to Coast, Open Hills, Rolling Farmland and Settled Combes, Wooded and Farmed Escarpment, Agricultural Foothills and Jurassic Coast.

Written narrative is supported by Geographical Information Systems (GIS) mapping, landscape photographs and historic maps, to inform and engage the reader. An evaluation of each landscape is made – assessing the strength of character of the landscape and its condition with issues and opportunities (forces for changes) identified. These, in turn, inform a series of **landscape visions**.

This study has been commissioned as part of a suite of evidence to inform the development phase (Stage 2 bid) of the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) Landscape Partnership Scheme project '**Reimagining the Manor**' – a project that recognises the threat to the character of the landscape through fragmentation of landholdings and historic estates.

The production of a thorough Landscape Character Assessment helps determine what is fundamental to, and special about, the character of the Quantock landscape and its setting. By identifying social, economic and environmental pressures for change, the LCA allows a clear vision, or series of visions, to be established for **planning, designing and managing** the area moving forward – to ensure, through projects like the NLHF bid, that these qualities are protected for future generations; befitting both people and place.

# 1. Introduction

## **This Study**

- 1.1 This Landscape Character Assessment combines the existing draft Landscape Character Assessment of the Quantock Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) with an assessment of the character of the landscape within the hinterland or setting of the designated AONB landscape. For the purposes of this study, this setting area is referred to as the Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme area (QLPS area).
- 1.2 This study is being undertaken as part of the development phase of the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) Landscape Partnership Scheme - 'Reimagining the Manor' - which recognises the threat to the landscape of the fragmentation of landholdings and historic estates.
- 1.3 The scheme has developed through a concern that the estates, characterising much of the Quantock Hills landscape (and its immediate setting) is under threat of being broken up; leading to the potential loss of the consistent, traditional and holistic landscape management approach that has been sustained for centuries (preserving the landscape fabric that is so uniquely and immediately identifiable as Quantock in character).
- 1.4 The concern is that the loss of traditional management, that has been born from an inherent understanding and appreciation of the local landscape, will lead to the progressive decline or loss of key features or special qualities of the Quantocks e.g. heritage features of the designed parklands and the rich tapestry of the agricultural landscapes. This concern was a catalyst to the Landscape Partnership Scheme application to the Heritage Lottery Fund (now the NLHF) in 2017.

## **The Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme**

- 1.5 The Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme (QLPS) was established through the Heritage Lottery Landscape Partnerships programme, bringing together organisations and groups that do not normally work in collaboration. The purpose of collective partnership working for the Quantock Hills is to achieve a wide range of landscape and community inspired aspirations and provide a long-term legacy of people and landscape engagement; a symbiotic relationship benefitting both the place and its people.
- 1.6 As referenced above, enhancements to the physical landscape and to the heritage assets of the QLPS Area (see 1.8 overleaf) are central to the project aims but, just as important, is a determination that the work of the QLPS will help reconnect people and place – to restore the relationship of local communities with the landscape of

Quantock Hills AONB and its wider hinterland; fostering a sense of belonging and a well-being that comes from a connection to one's local environment.

- 1.7 The overall vision and aim for the project is for more people to be able to enjoy this most special of landscapes, to have a greater understanding and appreciation of the area and to have a vested interest and involvement in its conservation, enhancement and sustainable management into the future.

### **The Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme area (the study area)**

- 1.8 When the AONB was designated in the 1950s, the process of Landscape Character Assessment had not been formally established<sup>1</sup>. Whilst many of the principles and criteria used to determine the boundaries of the protected landscape no doubt echoed elements of the character assessment approach formally recognised today, the AONB boundary, as designated, is very tightly determined by landform as well as significant sections of the boundary on both the south and north side of the hills, defined by the main arterial roads that border them – the A358 and A39 respectively.
- 1.9 The definitive AONB boundary delineates the very distinctive and prominent hill and ridge landscape that is unmistakable as the 'Quantock Hills' yet the boundary stops short of a wider landscape area that shares the same combination of elements, features and characteristics as those within and on the boundary of the designated AONB landscape.
- 1.10 As part of the Heritage Lottery Fund Phase One application (2017) the Quantock Hills AONB Service undertook a desk-based assessment of Landscape Character in order to identify a *draft* study area; an area extending beyond the boundaries of the nationally designated AONB Quantock Hills, but which is perceived to form part of the wider Quantock landscape, or what Berta Lawrence refers to in her book of the same name as 'Quantock Country'<sup>2</sup>. This draft area (refer **Figure 1.1**) has formed the basis for 'ground truthing' fieldwork assessment where the subtleties and detail of landscape character around and beyond the AONB boundary have been examined to help define a wider Quantock area (the QLPS area). This is an area that, as well as sharing landscape character attributes in common with the designated landscape, is also greatly influenced by its proximity to, and immediate views of, the prominent hill and ridge landscape of the AONB such that it is intrinsically bounded to it and thereby regarded as inherently 'Quantock' in character.

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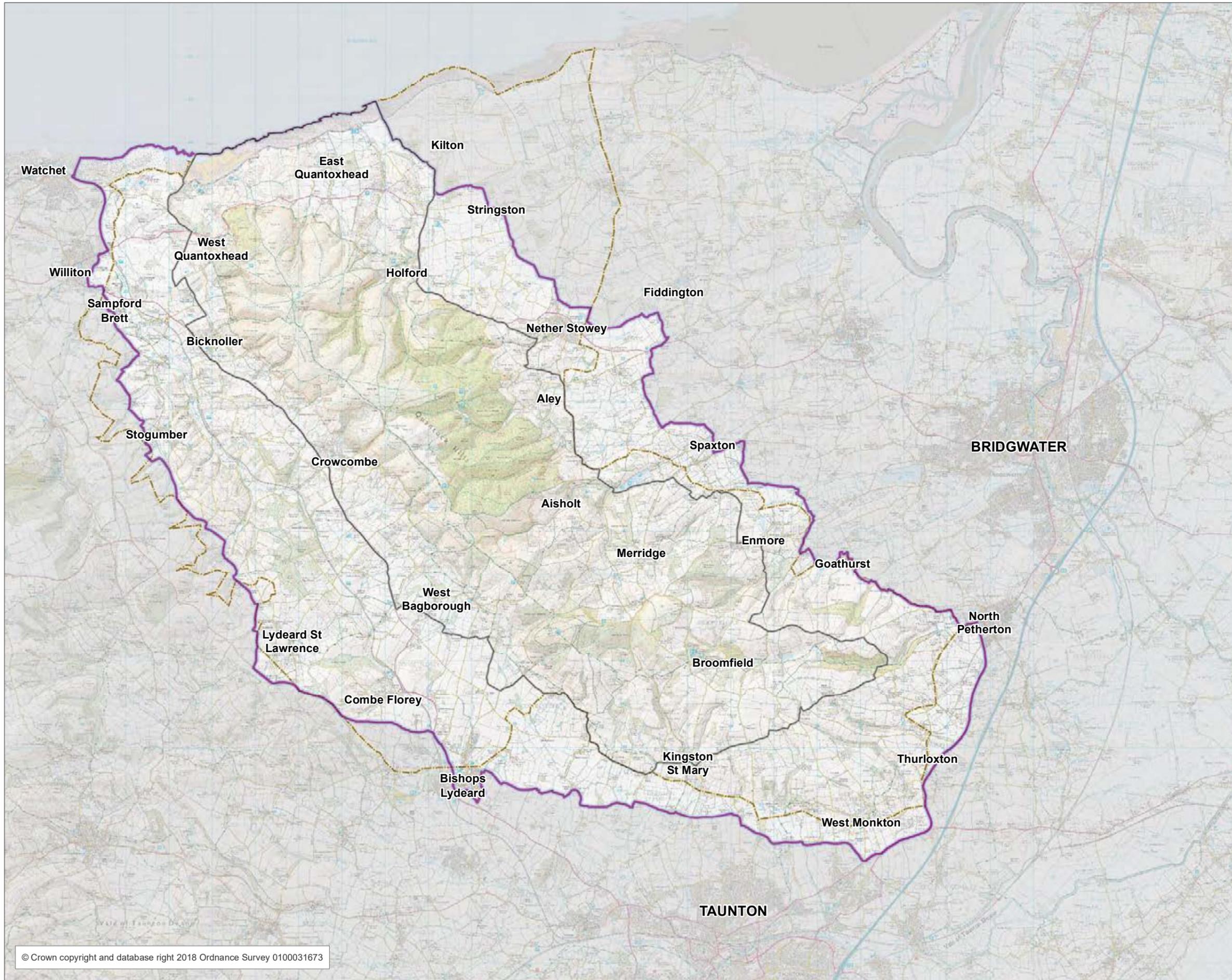
<sup>1</sup> Landscape Character Assessment has been recognized as a tool for understanding the landscape since the 1980s (Landscape Character Assessment – Guidance for England and Scotland 2002, Countryside Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage).

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence, Berta 1952. Quantock Country. Westaway London.

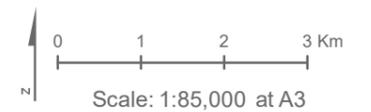
**THE QUANTOCK  
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**Figure 1.1: Study Area**

-  Quantock Hills AONB
-  Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme Area (the Study Area)
-  Original (draft) Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme Area



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- 1.11 This study recognises that there is an even wider area of landscape that shares some of the same character attributes with the AONB but for the purposes of this study, these areas have been excluded as they are perceptually too distant from the main hill and ridge land mass which therefore becomes a distant feature in views as opposed to 'looming large' as part of the immediate landscape experience. As with landscape character boundaries, the QLPS area boundary (**Figure 1.1**) is seen as definitive for study purposes – to help focus on issues for project implementation and delivery - but in reality the boundary of the setting to the AONB is transitional.

## **Landscape Character Assessment and the Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme**

*"Our landscapes are extremely important to us, they are a part of our cultural heritage. With sympathetic planning, design and management they offer an opportunity to provide a more harmonious link between man and the natural world, for the benefit of both. Sensitive, informed and integrated approaches should help us all to conserve, enhance, restore and regenerate landscapes that are attractive, diverse and publically valued, showing that environmental, social and economic benefits can go hand in hand".*

*An approach to Landscape Character Assessment, Christine Tudor, Natural England 2014*

### ***Informing Stage 2 of the NLHF Bid***

- 1.12 The purpose of undertaking this Landscape Character Assessment is to inform the Landscape Conservation Action Plan (LCAP), which forms the centre of the Stage 2 National Lottery Heritage Fund Bid. The Landscape Character Assessment analyses the QLPS landscape to provide an up-to-date baseline of information of the *natural, historic and perceptual character* of the landscape as well as identifying issues and forces for change that threaten the special qualities of this sensitive and much valued corner of the English countryside. By determining what is fundamental to, and special about, the character of the landscape, there can be a clear vision or landscape strategy for planning, designing and managing the area moving forwards to ensure those qualities are protected for future generations.

### ***Projects on the Ground***

- 1.13 The Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme will be an important mechanism for the issues, visions and guidelines identified in this report to be taken forward to projects on the ground – benefitting communities of people and place.
- 1.14 Within the QLPS area, a whole host of landscape and community based projects are planned with the aim of:

- Conserving and enhancing the area's biodiversity, land management, cultural, historical and archaeological assets and features, strengthening the local character and distinctiveness;
- Reconnecting local communities with their local landscapes, the natural and cultural heritage, inspiring active participation through cultural and learning activities, oral history, volunteering, mass participation activities and a comprehensive events programme;
- Improving access, both physical and virtual, to enable greater interaction with the landscape and heritage by a wider more varied audience;
- Increasing knowledge and skills-base of local communities, volunteers, professionals, students and partners in relevant land management activities associated with features of the scheme area;
- Ensuring that local people and communities have a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Quantock Hills landscape and how the forces and influences have shaped it as well as lifestyle and climate impacts on this vulnerable environment;
- Developing the desire and skills to enable people to undertake activities that sustain, manage and enhance the Quantock Hills landscape beyond the life of the funded Landscape Partnership.

## 2. Understanding Landscape

- 2.1 Perhaps one of the best definitions to help simplify the complexity and subjectivity of what is meant by 'landscape' is that provided by the European Landscape Convention<sup>3</sup> (ELC) which states that landscape is:

**"An area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors".**

*Definition of landscape (Council of Europe ELC, Florence October 2000)*

- 2.2 Central to the ELC definition is its reference to the 'character' of the landscape and this report focuses wholeheartedly on revealing the rich and varied character making up the **Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme (QPLS) Area**.
- 2.3 Landscape is the combination of people and place and of natural, cultural/social and perceptual and aesthetic elements as illustrated in the 'landscape wheel' below.



Figure 2.1 A 'landscape wheel' - illustrating how people and place combine with various elements (natural, cultural/social, perceptual and aesthetic) to make up our understanding of the landscape<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The European Landscape Convention is the first international treaty dedicated to the protection, management and planning of all landscapes within Europe. The ELC was signed by the UK Government in 2006 and introduced in 2007. It provides a people-centred and forward-looking way to reconcile management of the environment with the social and economic challenges of the future, and aims to help people to reconnect with place. Landscape Institute website as at 18/12/2018: <https://www.landscapeinstitute.org/policy/13732-2/>

## Landscape Character Assessment

### *An established tool*

- 2.4 Landscape Character Assessment is a well-established tool – using both desk based research and analysis and field survey.

*It is the process of identifying and describing variation in the character of the landscape. It seeks to identify and explain the unique combination of elements and features (characteristics) that make landscapes distinctive. This process results in the production of a Landscape Character Assessment<sup>5</sup>.*

- 2.5 Landscape is often difficult to understand and explain because people can interpret it in different ways. As such, Landscape Character Assessment can help to reduce the subjectivity of landscape by recording and describing features and elements within it – their combination and expression – thereby drawing out the essence of a place, to establish what makes one landscape special, distinct and different from another *but never better or worse*.
- 2.6 The process of Landscape Character Assessment is a means of breaking down the landscape 'jigsaw' into component pieces, where every piece can be distinguished from one another but when put back together reveals a seamless picture – a continuous landscape system, across all scales, that does not recognise or adhere to artificial boundaries such as parish or local authority limits.
- 2.7 The Landscape Character Assessment process sees the landscape broken down into Landscape Character Types (LCTs) and Landscape Character Areas (LCAs) described below:

**Landscape Character Types** are distinct types of landscape that are relatively homogenous in character. They are generic in nature in that they may occur in different areas in different parts of the country, but wherever they occur they share broadly similar combinations of geology, topography, drainage patterns, vegetation, historical land use and settlement pattern.

**Landscape Character Areas** are single, unique areas, which are the discrete geographical areas of a particular landscape type. Each will have its own individual character and identity, even though it shares the same generic characteristics with other areas of the same type.

*An approach to Landscape Character Assessment, Christine Tudor, Natural England 2014*

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

## ***Scale and Fit***

- 2.8 This LCA has been undertaken at a scale of 1:25,000. It encompasses the existing draft Landscape Character Assessment of the Quantock Hills, which has been reviewed and updated, and has taken into account the boundaries of existing LCAs in the vicinity of the Quantock Hills, namely:
- Sedgemoor District Council Landscape Assessment and Countryside Design Summary - revised edition (2003);
  - Taunton Deane Landscape Character Assessment (2011); and
  - West Somerset Landscape Character Assessment (1999).
- 2.9 These local scale assessments have in turn been considered in the context of the overarching National Character Areas (NCAs) of England. There are 159 NCAs that divide England into distinct natural areas based on a combination of landscape, biodiversity, geodiversity, history and cultural and economic activity<sup>6</sup>. NCA boundaries follow natural lines in the landscape. There are two NCAs covering the QLPA (**Figure 2.2**). The Key Characteristics taken from the Natural England NCA descriptions are outlined below along with Statements of Environmental Opportunity . These are:

### **NCA 144. Quantock Hills**

- A high heathland ridge below which much of the dip slope, and particularly the valleys and combes, are cloaked in woodland, which in turn is surrounded by a mantle of rural agricultural land.
- The Quantock soils are mainly brown earths but there is a thin layer of peat overlying much of the heathland areas. The area is underlain in the north mainly by Devonian Hangman Sandstone, forming the highest ground of the hills, and in the south by Devonian Ilfracombe Slates (with thin limestones) and Morte Slates.
- A well-wooded landscape with large areas of ancient woodland and coniferous forestry plantation.
- Beech hedgebanks bound the rectangular fields around the edge of the open plateau and on the lower agricultural land in the south. Mixed hedgerows are used elsewhere to enclose smaller, irregular fields.
- Some beech hedges have been allowed to grow into mature trees and these now form a key feature in some parts of the hills, particularly along the Quantock ridge at its southern end.
- The area is predominantly pastoral, the most significant farm type being lowland grazing livestock.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-character-area-profiles-data-for-local-decision-making> (as at 05.01.2019)

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**Figure 2.2: National Character Areas**

-  Quantock Hills AONB
-  Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme Area (the Study Area)
- National Character Areas**
-  142. Somerset Levels and Moors
-  143. Mid Somerset Hills
-  144. Quantock Hills
-  145. Exmoor
-  146. Vale of Taunton and Quantock Fringes



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- The NCA has an important role as a catchment both for public water supply through Hawkrigde and Durleigh reservoirs which are outside the NCA, and for many private supplies. The area is also part of the upland catchment for the River Parrett.
- The Quantock hill tops provide important habitats of sessile oak woodland with a wealth of lichens and bryophytes; and lowland heath, which includes heather, whortleberry, bell heather, western gorse and cross-leaved heath.
- Iconic species for the area include red deer and buzzards. The NCA also provides habitats for rarer species such as Bechstein's bat, pied flycatcher, Dartford warbler, and nightjar.
- Bronze-age burial mounds, iron-age hill forts, standing stones, medieval manor houses and industrial heritage contribute to a strong historic environment.
- Many farmsteads are built of local slate and sandstone rubble; the Devonian Sandstone of the Quantock Hills is widely used in the area. The design of the church towers is noticeable, with their ambitious, prominent and decorated towers.
- Settlement is sparse, consisting of isolated farms, hamlets and small villages located along the springline or tucked into the narrow combes and valleys. Larger villages such as Nether Stowey lie at the junction with the Vale of Taunton and Quantock Fringes NCA.
- The Quantock Hills are a popular destination for day-trippers from around the region. The upland areas are most popular for visitors who enjoy the natural and historic landscape, the views and heritage assets of the NCA.

## **NCA144 Quantock Hills - Statements of Environmental Opportunities**

**SEO1: *Protect, manage and enhance the landscape of wild and open summits, wooded combes and rolling fields***, which support a wide variety of habitats and species, helping to regulate water quality and flow, protecting soils structure and storing carbon.

**SEO2: *Protect and maintain the many heritage assets, from prehistoric monuments to 19<sup>th</sup> century farmsteads, the wealth of geodiversity, the dark skies, and the sense of tranquillity and remoteness*** found throughout the area, which contribute strongly to the sense of history, recreation and enjoyment of the Quantock landscape.

**SEO3: *Reinforce and protect the rural and historic character of the agricultural landscape and its distinctly sparse settlement character, scattering of isolated farmsteads, tiny hamlets and small villages.*** Protect and manage the longstanding agricultural land use for its important role in

the local economy, for the habitats it supports and to ensure that it contributes to the regulation of soil and water quality.

**SEO4: *Sustainably manage the high visitor pressure associated with this distinctive landscape*** to ensure that the numerous recreation, education, access and health opportunities continue to be enjoyed by the local community and visitors alike.

### **NCA 146. Vale of Taunton and Quantock Fringes**

- The topography can be divided into four distinct areas: the flood plain; a gentle low vale underlain by Triassic mudstones; a more elevated, undulating vale underlain by Devonian slates and sandstones as well as Triassic sandstones and mudstones; and the open, wind-swept cliffed coast underlain by Triassic mudstones, Jurassic mudstones and limestones and a small section of Pleistocene gravels.
- Open and wind-swept coast with low cliffs, mudflats and wave-cut platforms in mudstones and limestones. The often spectacularly folded and faulted Triassic and Jurassic mudstones and limestones that are visible on the extensive shore platforms and the cliffs are renowned for their fossils, and are of international importance for their stratigraphy.
- A number of tree-lined streams and rivers wind through the area. The River Tone and its tributaries drain the area to the south, while in the north Doniford Stream, fed by tributaries arising from the Quantocks and Brendon Hills, drains into the sea at Watchet. To the east many streams drain off the Quantock dip slopes and flow into the River Parrett. The Bridgwater and Taunton Canal runs across the south of the area.
- Woodland cover is generally low, at 6 per cent, although the area has a wooded feel as there are many hedgerow trees (such as oak), orchards, remnants of parkland, small woodlands with ash and oak and bankside trees such as alder and, rarely, black poplar.
- The area was once characterised by cider apple orchards. Few old orchards survive and are scattered throughout the area, particularly in the south. Modern bush orchards are being planted.
- Lowland mixed farming landscape, with dense hedgerows enclosing rectilinear fields. Permanent grassland characterises the flood plain with arable, pasture, market gardening and orchards in the vales and pasture and arable on more undulating ground.
- Scattered patches of floristically rich lowland meadow and limestone grasslands characterised by lesser knapweed, field scabious, milkwort and thyme; coastal

and flood plain grazing marsh; intertidal sand and mudflats; parkland; maritime cliff and slope; and small patches of heath, fen and marsh.

- Scattered settlements of farmsteads, hamlets and villages linked by sunken winding lanes. Distinctive gentry architecture with parkland, local vernacular of red sandstone buildings and prominent Perpendicular<sup>7</sup> church towers to the west and south, and grey Lias along the coast and to the east.
- Sweeping views from the coast across the bay to Wales; to Hinkley Point power station in the east; and to Minehead in the west. Exmoor, the Blackdown Hills and the Quantock Hills provide a backdrop to the area and expansive views from these uplands emphasise the lush pastoral nature of this area.
- The M5 motorway runs east–west (as does the main rail line), linking several of the larger towns, including Taunton and Wellington. Incremental development and industrialisation from the towns are evident, especially adjacent to the motorway.

### **NCA 146: Vale of Taunton and Quantock Fringes Statements of Environmental Opportunity:**

**SEO1: *Conserve and promote the geology and geodiversity of the Vale of Taunton and Quantock Fringes, including the Jurassic Coast***, the suite of national and local geological sites and the distinctive relationship between geology, coastal geomorphology, soils, landform and land use, promoting opportunities for recreation in the area and interpretation of its unique features.

**SEO2: *Protect, manage and enhance the distinctive farmed landscape, while creating a balance of productive mixed farmland and diversity of habitats and associated species***. Create and enhance connecting corridors of hedgerows, orchards, calcareous and flood plain grazing marsh, small woodlands, and hedgerow and riverside trees, and manage parkland and other habitats such as coastal habitats including intertidal salt marsh and mudflats for their contribution to sense of place, and their positive role in reducing soil erosion, enhancing water quality and managing coastal erosion. Promote connecting corridor linkage with the Blackdown Hills, Exmoor and the Quantock Hills.

**SEO3: *Protect and manage the area's historic environment including its rich heritage of hill forts, Roman remains, ridge and furrow, manor houses and vernacular architecture, parkland and distinctive field patterns***, engaging both visitors and local communities in understanding how the interaction of human and natural factors has shaped the farmed landscape of today.

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<sup>7</sup> Perpendicular style – late phase of Gothic architecture in England (approximately late 14<sup>th</sup> to early 16<sup>th</sup> century). Style characterized by strong vertical lines, very large windows with elaborate tracery, fan vaulting and hammerbeam roof  
<https://www.britainexpress.com/church-history.htm?term=Perpendicular+Gothic>

**SEO4: Safeguard and manage soil and water resources, notably the Rivers Tone and Parrett, as part of the wider Somerset Levels and Moors priority catchment and at the coast, working with naturally functioning hydrological processes to maintain water quality and regulate supply; reduce flooding; and manage land to reduce soil erosion and water pollution and to retain and capture carbon.**

## **Consideration of landscape within the AONB Management Plan**

- 2.10 As well as the Landscape Character policy within the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF 2012, revised 2018) and Local Plan Policies (relevant to the local planning authorities crossing the hills), the AONB Management Plan also considers landscape character in detail. The Quantock Hills AONB Management Plan is produced as a requirement of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 to provide the statutory and policy basis for the protection and management of its natural and cultural assets<sup>8</sup>.

### ***Landscape Character and Quality***

- 2.11 There is a dedicated Landscape Character and Quality ‘theme’ within the Quantock Hills AONB Management Plan, the aim, objectives and management policies of which are outlined below:

#### **Aim:**

That the beautiful character, special qualities and diversity of the AONB landscape are understood, conserved and where possible enhanced.

#### **Landscape Objective:**

*To encourage and deliver understanding, conservation and enhancement of the character and quality of the AONB landscape through land use and development management that supports its special qualities.*

#### **Management Policies:**

**LP1** To protect, understand and enhance the landscape and character of the AONB and support those delivering these elements.

**LP2** To promote the highest standards of landscape management in respect of landscape beauty, natural capital and ecosystem services for all land uses.

**LP3** To encourage public understanding and support for landscape conservation and enhancement.

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<sup>8</sup> Quantock Hills AONB Management Plan 2019-2024

**LP4** To further develop, promote and utilise the landscape character approach in AONB management and policy, including development of LCA-based design guidance.

**LP5** To continue to offer landscape character advice to Local Planning Authorities in strategic and development management consultations.

### 3. The Quantock Hills AONB and its Setting

- 3.1 Covering an area of 99km<sup>2</sup>, the Quantock Hills AONB is one of England's most beautiful and highly valued landscapes. It is a narrow upland plateau landscape that stretches southeast to northwest from the fertile vale just north of Taunton to the Jurassic Coast on the Bristol Channel at Kilve and East Quantoxhead. The Quantock Hills was the first AONB to be designated in England in 1956 and was confirmed as having AONB status on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1957.

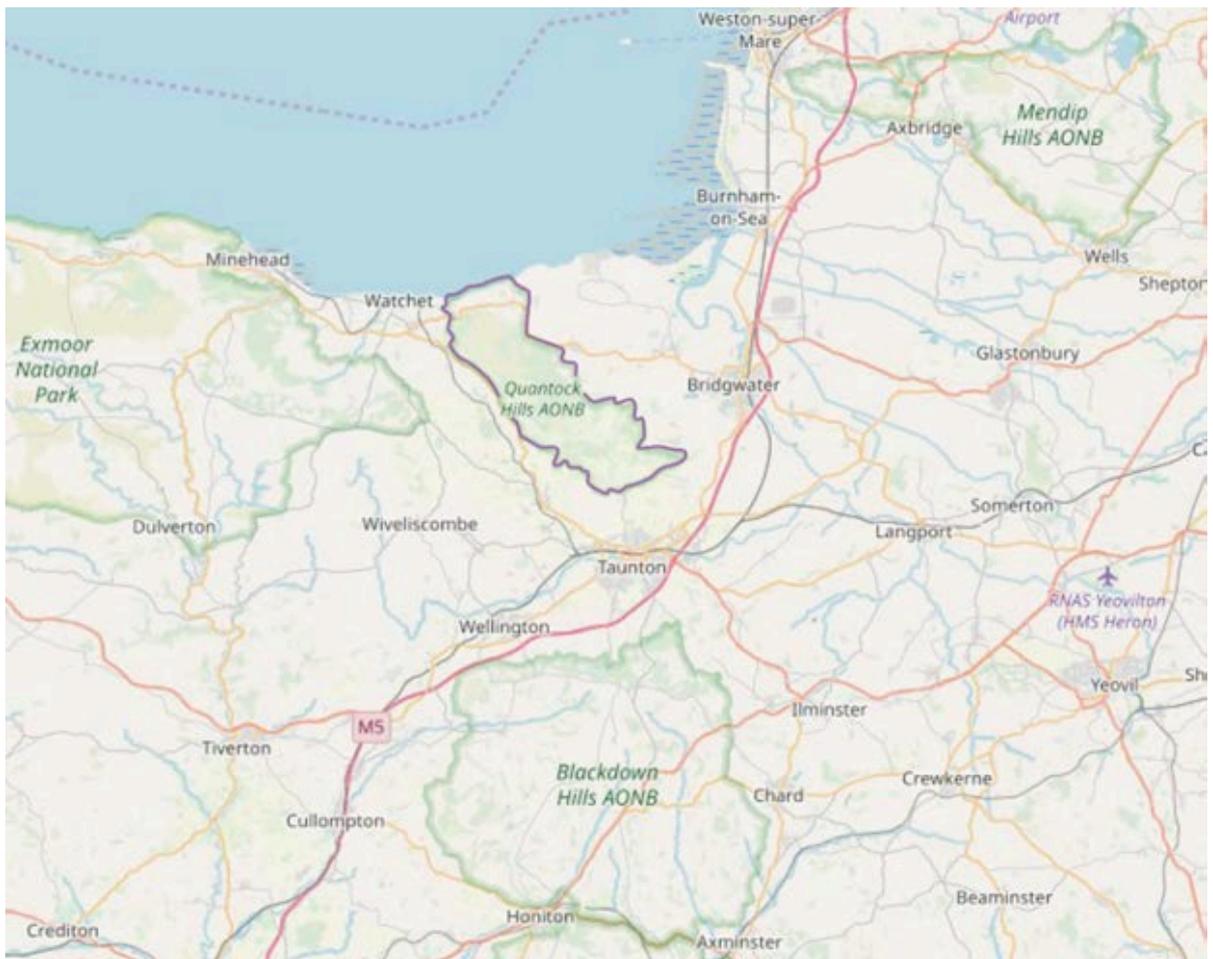


Figure 3.1 Location map of the Quantock Hills AONB in the context of other nationally protected landscapes

- 3.2 Formed from an underlying geology of Devonian sandstone the Quantock Hills stand proud and imposing above their low lying, agricultural hinterland to form a strong backdrop and skyline feature that influences the landscape scene over a wide area. With a general summit height of around 300m AOD (Figure 3.2), the Quantocks are much lower than they appear but nonetheless provide inspiring views and panoramas to include the Severn Estuary coast to South Wales, the wide vales around the Rivers Tone and Parrett, the flat, low lying landscape of the Somerset Levels and Moors and the hill and upland landscapes including the Blackdowns Hills AONB, Mendip Hills AONB, and Exmoor National Park.

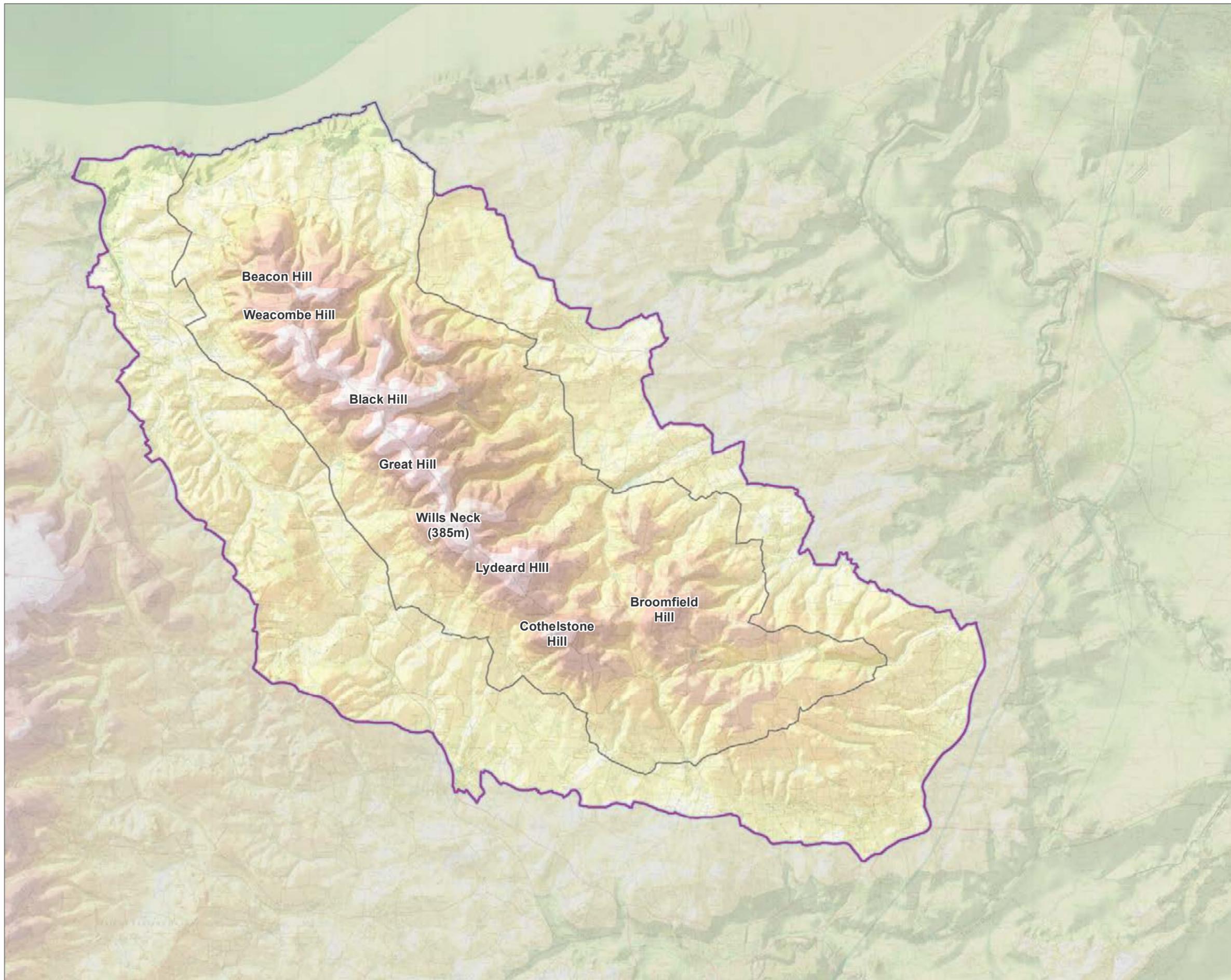
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**Figure 3.2: Landform**

-  Quantock Hills AONB
-  Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme Area (the Study Area)

**OS Terrain 5  
Elevation (m AOD)**

-  -84.1 - -29.1
-  -29 - 25.8
-  25.9 - 80.8
-  80.9 - 135.7
-  135.8 - 190.7
-  190.8 - 245.6
-  245.7 - 300.6
-  300.7 - 355.6
-  355.7 - 410.5



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- 3.3 The highest point on the Quantock Hills forms a watershed with tributary streams carving valleys through the hills, down and into the valleys and vales of the River Doniford to the west (and on to the Bristol Channel), the River Tone to the South and the River Parrett to the East (**Figure 3.3**). Some Streams issuing in the hills run directly meet with the Jurassic Coast such as the River Holford.
- 3.4 Although covering a relatively small area, the Quantock Hills encompasses great variety of different types of landscape. The rugged Jurassic Coast with its striated cliff face and blue lias terraces stretches into the Severn Estuary. A mantle of farmed hills and combes are dotted with small farm woods, historic parkland, sparse settlement and large country houses that occupy commanding positions. The western side of the hill is flanked by a steep wooded and farmed escarpment that gives way to the upper reaches of the Doniford Valley. Whilst, on the northeast side, deep stream-cut combes, dense with sessile oak woodland, spread like fingers into the almost unbroken expanse of upland heathland hills and combes. Open hilltops of neutral grassland and hills and combes dense with coniferous forests complete the scene.

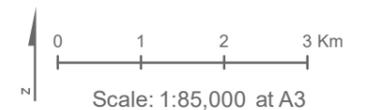
### **The Quantock Setting**

- 3.5 The Quantock Hills are so intrinsically linked to their lower-lying hinterland and this is reflected in the NCA146 profile of the 'Vale of Taunton and Quantock Fringes'. The QLPS area includes the whole of the designated landscape as summarised above but also its wider setting. This setting area includes the picturesque landscape of the Doniford Valley, extending towards the Brendon Hills in the west and to the Jurassic Coast in the north. This valley landscape can perhaps be seen as the landscape separating the Quantock Hills AONB and Exmoor National Park although conversely may be regarded as the landscape that connects these two separately designated landscapes.
- 3.6 In the northeast, the QLPS area includes part of the *Lowland Hills to Coast* landscape that stretches beyond the AONB boundary. In the south and east the setting is defined by an extension of the *Rolling Hills and Combes* landscape that transcends the boundary of the designated landscape; ensuring intrinsically 'Quantock' landscapes such as those around Hestercombe, West Monkton and Thurloxton, are included in the study. In turn, wrapping around the *Rolling Farmland and Settled Combes* are *Agricultural Foothills* that form a transition between the landscape of the 'hills' and the landscape of the 'vales' that surround Taunton to the south and Bridgwater to the north (refer to **Figure 6.1**)

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**Figure 3.3: Hydrology**

- Quantock Hills AONB
- Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme Area (the Study Area)
- Mean High Water (Springs)
- Mean Low Water (Springs)
- Surface water



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## 4. The Natural Landscape

4.1 Key aspects of the natural landscape are outlined below. Information has been drawn and summarised from a number of key references:

- British Geological Society website - <https://www.bgs.ac.uk>.
- Strategic Stone Study – A Building Stone Atlas of Somerset and Exmoor (English Heritage 2011, rebranded Historic England 2017).
- Quantock Hills AONB Service /Geckoella – Geology and Fossils of the Quantock Hills and Coast.
- The Landscape of the Quantock Hills (Countryside Agency, 2003).
- Quantock Hills AONB Management Plan 2019-2024 (Quantock Hills AONB Service).

### Geology, landform and soils

4.2 The landscape of the Quantock Hills is mostly defined by rocks from the Devonian period (around 420 to 360 million years ago) – the northwest end of the Quantock mantle defined by older Lower Devonian Rocks and the south-eastern end of the hills defined by Middle and Upper Devonian rocks. These sedimentary rocks were laid down under a shallow sea, compressed into hard rock, folded to a ridge and subjected to hundreds of millions of years of erosion, inundation and deposition<sup>9</sup>. The rocks of the Quantocks are the same as those that underlie to upland heath landscape of Exmoor but the geology of these two protected landscapes is separated by a large fault characterising the escarpment landscape on the Quantocks' western side. The majority of the inland area beyond the designated landscape comprises younger rocks of the Triassic period (around 250 – 200 million years ago) with the landscape running to the coast, and the intertidal zone, defined by rocks of the Jurassic to Triassic period (Jurassic period around 200 – 145 million years ago).

4.3 The landform of the Quantock Hills was significantly shaped during the Ice Age. Although the hills were not covered with ice, the ground was permanently frozen with seasonal snowfields. With water unable to percolate the ground due to the frozen conditions, the many combes and valleys so characteristic of the Quantocks were formed due to the increase in surface water draining from the hills.

4.4 A summary of the main rock formations underlying the QLPS area are illustrated in **Figure 4.1** and discussed overleaf.

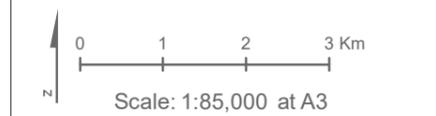
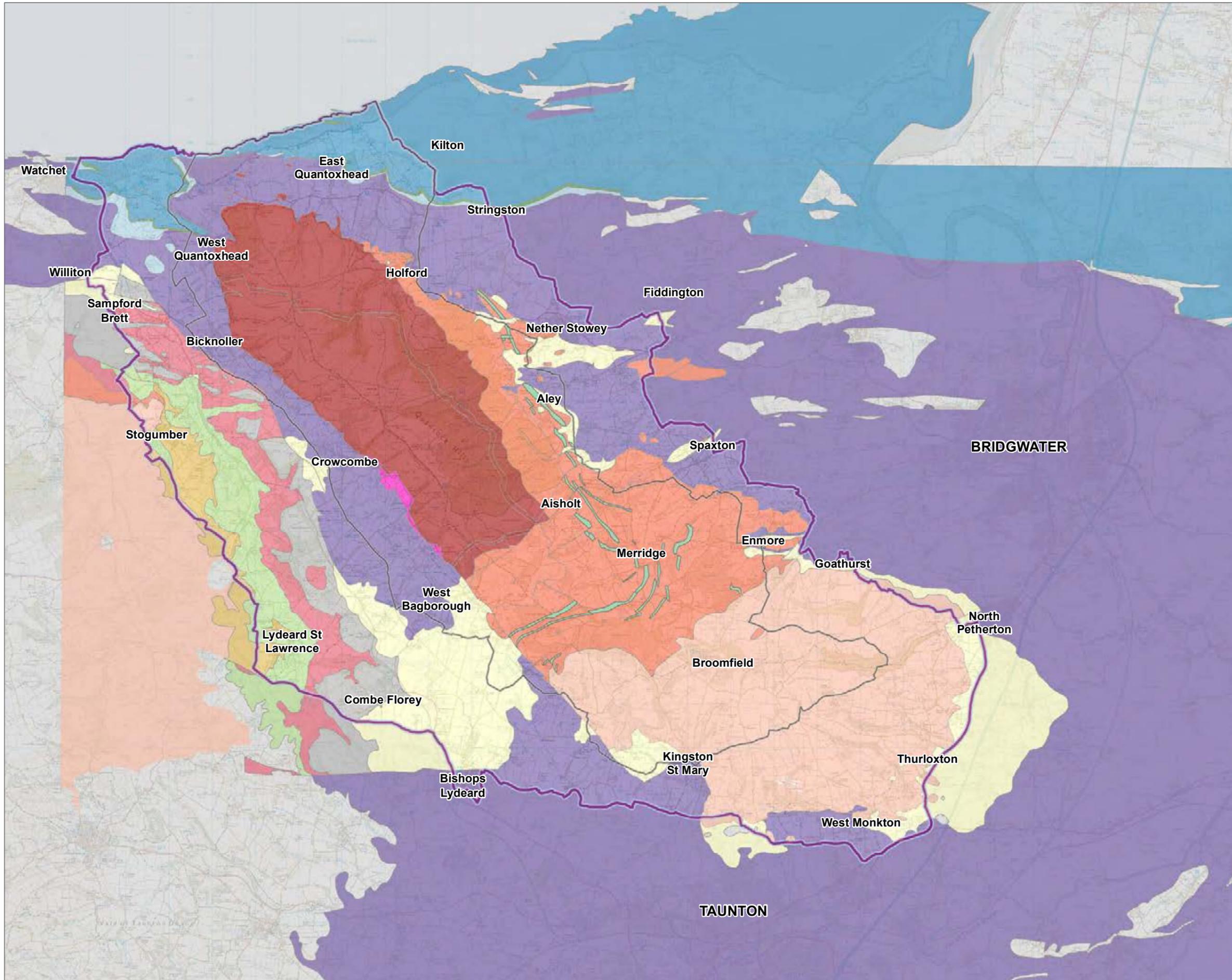
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<sup>9</sup> Riley, H, 2006 'The Historic Landscape of the Quantock Hills'. English Heritage.

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**Figure 4.1: Geology**

-  Quantock Hills AONB
-  Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme Area (the Study Area)
- Bedrock Geology (1:50k)**
- Jurassic - Triassic**
-  Langport Member, Blue Lias Formation and Charmouth Mudstone Formation (Undifferentiated)
- Triassic**
-  Westbury Formation and Cotham Member (Undifferentiated)
-  Aylesbeare Mudstone Group
-  Mercia Mudstone Group
-  Blue Anchor Formation
-  Chester Formation
-  Helsby Sandstone Formation
-  Vexford Breccias
- Permian**
-  Wiveliscombe Sandstones
- Devonian**
-  Limestones (Aisholt, Holwell, Leigh Barton, Roadwater and Rodhuish)
-  Ilfracombe Slates Formation
-  Hangman Sandstone Formation
-  Lynton Formation
-  Morte Slates Formation



## ***Lynton Formation and Hangman Sandstone Formation***

- 4.5 The oldest rocks are the Lynton Formation (previously known as Lynton Slates or Lynton Beds) which are finely laminated sandstones and mudstones, slates and siltstones of the Lower to Middle Devonian period and are between 300m and 400m thick. These rocks outcrop in a small geographical area between Crowcombe and Bagborough Hill. Where sandstone becomes dominant in the succession, the Lynton formation is overlain by Hangman Sandstone Formation (previously known as Hangman Grits or Hangman Sandstone Group) and indeed the Hangman Sandstone Formation defines the surface geology of the heathland and forested hills that stretch from West Quantoxhead in the northwest to west of Lydeard Hill in the southeast. This rock is mainly sandstone - purple, grey and green – with interbeds of cleaved shale, siltstone and very fine-grained sandstone and some thicker units of cleaved purple mudstone and fine-grained sandstone<sup>10</sup>. Historically these very hard rocks have been quarried for hundreds of years for road building material. Quarrying at Triscombe where operation ceased in the late 1990s has left an obvious, indelible scar on face of the scarp.
- 4.6 The Lynton Formation and Hangman Sandstone Formation is associated with free draining very acidic sandy and loamy soils<sup>11</sup>.



Figure 4.1 Hangman Stone Formation at Halsway Manor and again at Nether Stowey Clock Tower (right) – the latter constructed of mixed dressed blocks from the Ilfracombe Slates Formation and Hangman Sandstone Formation and Helsby Sandstone.

## ***Ilfracombe Slates Formation***

- 4.7 Overlaying the Hangman Sandstone Formation and wrapping around the base of the highest part of the hills (from Holford in the north, stretching beyond Enmore in the east, Broomfield in the south and West Bagborough in the west) the central area of the Quantock Hills is defined by a surface geology of Ilfracombe Slates Formation. The Ilfracombe Slate outcrops across Exmoor, the Brendons and the Quantock Hills and typically consists of greyish or brownish cleaved slates with thin

<sup>10</sup> British Geological Society website as at 17/12/2018: <https://www.bgs.ac.uk/Lexicon/lexicon.cfm?pub=HASA>

<sup>11</sup> Cranfield University 2018. The Soils Guide. Available: [www.landis.org.uk](http://www.landis.org.uk). Cranfield University, UK. Last accessed 17/12/2018

siltstones or fine-grained sandstone units. The harder sandstones of this formation have historically been quarried for building and sometimes for walling. The clock tower at Nether Stowey was constructed in 1897 and includes a mix of dressed sandstone blocks from the Ilfracombe Slates Formation (as well as Hangman Sandstone Formations and some Helsby Sandstone)<sup>12</sup>. A very distinctive and very localised rock of this formation is the Cockercombe Tuff – a fine-grained, grey-green volcanic lithic tuff – found around Cockercombe, Keepers Coombe and Plainsfield. This stone was principally used for the construction of Quantock Lodge and the Plainsfield Gatehouse – the latter being a prominent roadside landmark building exhibiting the grey-green hues of the Cockercombe Tuff with contrastingly warm tones of Bath Stone and Helsby Sandstone dressings to form the interior of the archway.

- 4.8 Higher in the formation are outcropping belts of limestone – Roadwater Limestone – running southwest to northeast from Cothelstone to Merridge and southeast to northwest from Merridge to Bincombe. Historically this limestone was worked for the production of lime and also for use in the construction of local rough walling in farms and villages<sup>13</sup>. There are a number of surviving former limestone workings (quarries and kilns) occurring in intermittent bands within the Quantock landscape.
- 4.9 The Ilfracombe slates formation gives rise to loamy, free draining slightly acid soils<sup>14</sup>.

### ***Morte Slates Formation***

- 4.10 Overlying the Ilfracombe Slates Formation is the Morte Slates Formation which outcrops across Exmoor and the Brendon Hills as well as within the Quantock Hills. The Morte Slate Formation comprises a thick sequence of silvery green thickly cleaved slates interbedded with occasional fine-grained sandstones<sup>15</sup>. These are softer slates, which have weathered to create the characteristic, lower-lying rounded, sinuous landscape of the southern Quantocks – the rolling hill country synonymous with the Quantock Hills around Broomfield and Kingston St Mary and extending out to West Monkton and Thurloxton. Villages and houses built of these slates are an important element in the landscape character of the southern Quantocks and they are widely quarried in this area, notably at West Monkton, and King's Cliff near North Petherton. There is no better example in the QLPS area of the use of Morte Slate than within the Grade I Registered Park and Garden of Special Historic Interest at Hestercombe where rills, columns, paving, walls and hemispherical rotunda pools exhibit architectural mastery and exquisite craftsmanship to showcase this rock. Morte Slate walls are a repeating feature of the southeast extent of the Quantock LPSA.

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<sup>12</sup> Strategic Stone Study – A Building Stone Atlas of Somerset and Exmoor (published by English Heritage August 2011 and rebranded by Historic England December 2017)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Cranfield University 2018. The Soils Guide. Available: [www.landis.org.uk](http://www.landis.org.uk). Cranfield University, UK. Last accessed 17/12/2018

<sup>15</sup> Strategic Stone Study – A Building Stone Atlas of Somerset and Exmoor (published by English Heritage August 2011 and rebranded by Historic England December 2017)

- 4.11 Associated with the Morte Slates at Hestercombe is the Permo-Triassic igneous Hestercombe Diorite (a younger rock formed by magma injected into the slates). The Diorite is reddish-brown in colour and speckled. It is used locally for cut stone / square building stone and rubblestone as can be seen within the house at Hestercombe and Bampfylde Hall.
- 4.12 The Morte Slates Formation gives rise to loamy, freely draining soils<sup>16</sup>.

### ***Helsby Sandstone Formation (formally Otter Sandstone Formation)***

- 4.13 The Helsby Sandstone Formation (formerly known as Otter Sandstone, Upper Sandstone and Otter Sandstones) is fine to medium grained sandstone that weathers to sand near the surface. The formation extends from south Devon coast between Budleigh Salterton and Sidmouth northwards to Near Minehead. Within the QLPS area Helsby Sandstone defines the surface geology from West Bagborough to Bishops Lydeard, west of Kingston St Mary, Rowford / Cheddon Fitzpaine and from Goathurst, wrapping around the southeast extent of the area near Thurloxtton and West Monkton (extending beyond the scheme area, east of the M5).

### ***Mercia Mudstone Group***

- 4.14 Triassic rocks of the Mercia Mudstone Group (deposited between 200 and 250 million years ago) define the geology of the fertile farmland flanking the hill and ridge landscape of the Quantocks. These are dominantly brown and red-brown (or less frequently green grey) calcareous clays and mudstones with occasional beds of green siltstone and fine-grained mudstones as well as gypsum, anhydrite and halite.
- 4.15 The Mercia Mudstone Group gives rise to moderate to highly fertile loamy, sometimes clayey soils with some impeded drainage<sup>17</sup>.

### ***Langport Member (Blue Lias Formation and Charmouth Mudstone Formation)***

- 4.16 The most visually striking and dramatic geology of the Quantock QLPS area is the coastal edge and intertidal zone – designated as a geological SSSI and falling within the AONB landscape. The full extent of the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) reaches from Blue Anchor in the west beyond Lilstock in the east. Some of the best exposures define the coastal the edge of the AONB – evident in the layers of yellow – grey limestones and darker mudstones and shales of the low cliff exposures that front the dramatic terraces and ledges of the ‘Lower Lias’ (harder limestone alternating with softer shale beds). The Lower Lias stretches and curves across the

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<sup>16</sup> Cranfield University 2018. The Soils Guide. Available: [www.landis.org.uk](http://www.landis.org.uk). Cranfield University, UK. Last accessed 17/12/2018

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

foreshore; creating, at low tide, a landscape of great visual spectacle and otherworldly character. This area is important for coastal geomorphology (as a result of wind, waves, currents and sea level changes) and demonstrates a particularly well-developed series of intertidal shore platforms that vary in width from 200mm to 600mm. A key feature of the platforms is their development in a macro-tidal environment and they are among the best examples of these coastal features in Britain<sup>18</sup>.

- 4.17 The Lower Lias rocks are of international scientific importance with a section of the cliff at East Quantoxhead identified by specialists as a World reference point within the geological time scale<sup>19</sup> marking an internationally agreed division between two parts of the Lower Lias succession (196.5 million years ago). This means that all sedimentary rocks of this age in the world are related back to this Quantock Hills cliff exposure<sup>20</sup>.
- 4.18 The rocks have historically been exploited for lime and there are a number of surviving kilns dotted along the coast. The Blue Lias gives rise to lime-rich loamy and clayey soils with impeded drainage of high fertility<sup>21</sup>.

## **Habitats and wildlife**

- 4.19 It is the combination of geology, landform, soils and historic land use within the Quantock Hills and immediate hinterland that has resulted in a wide range of semi-natural and farmed habitats condensed within a relatively small geographical area; creating a biodiversity resource of great variety and significance. Habitats of the Quantock Hills have been influenced over millennia by human action upon, and inaction with, the landscape. Designated Nature Conservation sites are shown in **Figure 4.2**.

### *Heathland*

- 4.20 Centuries of grazing and management (through swaling or controlled burning<sup>22</sup>) has created the heathland landscape we recognise today – a dwarf mosaic shrub heath that is often regarded as the true Quantock landscape. Quantock Commoners' sheep, ponies, and sometimes cattle, graze the hills and combined with rotational burning, are vital to keeping the heathland open and to controlling invasive species such as silver birch and mountain ash.

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<sup>18</sup> Natural England website as at 17/12/2018 citation for Blue Anchor to Lilstock Coast SSSI:

<https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/PDFsForWeb/Citation/1003759.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Called a 'Global Boundary Stratotype Section and Point' (GSSP)

<sup>20</sup> Information leaflet 'Geology and Fossils of the Quantock Hills and Coast' (Quantock Hills AONB and Geckoella – consultants for ecology and geology) via Quantock Hills AONB website:

[https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/11909d\\_057193e15cf441179822f4c1dbe6f677.pdf?index=true](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/11909d_057193e15cf441179822f4c1dbe6f677.pdf?index=true)

<sup>21</sup> Cranfield University 2018. The Soils Guide. Available: [www.landis.org.uk](http://www.landis.org.uk). Cranfield University, UK. Last accessed 17/12/2018

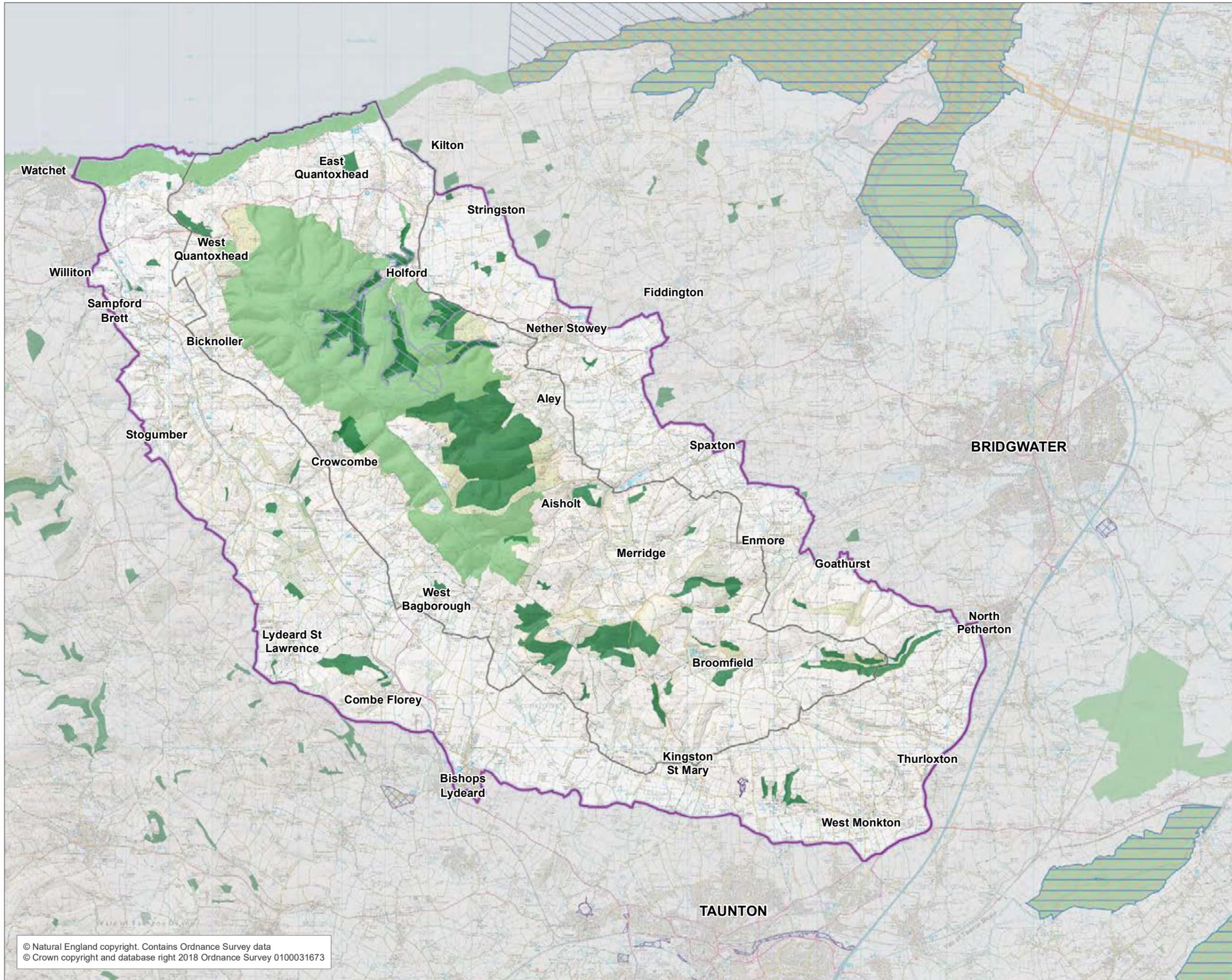
<sup>22</sup> For ecological reasons swaling is carried out only in winter and on areas no larger than four hectares at a time. Each block of heather is burnt on a 15 year rotation, ensuring good grazing for livestock and healthy habitat for wildlife (From Quantock Hills AONB Information Leaflet – Heathland Birds of the Quantock Hills:

[https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/11909d\\_328bcd88c9f24708bb11456fb699bd93.pdf?index=true](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/11909d_328bcd88c9f24708bb11456fb699bd93.pdf?index=true)

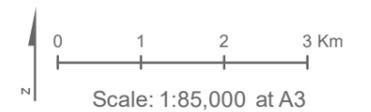
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**Figure 4.2: Natural Environment Designations**

-  Quantock Hills AONB
-  Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme Area (the Study Area)
-  Ramsar
-  Special Area of Conservation
-  Special Protection Area
-  Local Nature Reserve
-  National Nature Reserve
-  Ancient Woodlands
-  Site of Special Scientific Interest



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- 4.21 The Quantock heathland along with the upland oak woodland habitats together forms an extensive area of semi-natural habitat. The ecological importance is reflected its designation as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Supporting lowland and upland heathland, this landscape cloaks the hilltops and combes and is characterised by both ling and bell heather, wortleberry, cross-leaved heath, western gorse as well as bristle-leaved bent and wavy-hair grass. Boggy areas or acid flushes enhance biological interest of the heathland landscape, being the most botanically rich habitats in the AONB. The purple and yellow swathes of the bell heather and western gorse are a visual spectacle in the summer months. Bracken occurs in the better-drained deeper soils and, whilst providing important cover for birds such as Whinchat and Nightjar, requires controlling<sup>23</sup> through management to prevent this invasive species overtaking on the heath (as has happened in some of the steep sided combes).
- 4.22 The heathland supports a wide range of birds, invertebrates and mammals. The heathland forms part of the Exmoor and Quantocks Important Bird Area (IBA) due to its population of Stonechat, Whinchat, Peregrine falcon and Nightjar. Herds of Red deer are synonymous with the heathland and woodland of the Quantock Hills landscape but are also as likely, today, to be found lying in the farmed fields of the Quantock foothills. The heathland is also home to populations of Adder.

*Red deer are the largest free-roaming wild animals in the UK, their continued presence in the Quantocks carries symbolic weight and they are perhaps the most publicly appreciated element of Quantock wildlife.*

*From Quantock Hills AONB Management Plan 2019-2024*

### **Trees and Woodland**

- 4.23 There are four principle types of woodland in and around the Quantock Hills as outlined below.

#### Sessile oak woodland

- 4.24 Sessile oak woodland, growing over the hard Devonian sandstone, characterises the steep sided combes (Holford Combe and Hodder's Combe and the hillsides at Shervage Wood and Alfoxton Wood). These woods are dominated by sessile oak with some Rowan, Birch, Holly and Hazel (and Alder and Willow in wetter areas). These woods with their cool, moist microclimate support bryophytes, epiphytic lichens, and fungi of international importance. The sessile oak woodlands are

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<sup>23</sup> Bracken is either controlled mechanically or through spraying in spring/early summer.

designated as SSSI and recognised at European level as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). These woodlands support a range of bat and bird species.

### Ash-hazel woodland

- 4.25 Ash-hazel woodlands are associated with the limestone bands of the Ilfracombe Slates and the less acidic soils of the Morte Slates Formation, of the central and southern reaches of the AONB. These include for example the Somerset Wildlife Trust reserve of Aisholt<sup>24</sup> Wood and part of Buncombe Wood on the lower slopes of Cothelstone Hill. This woodland permits good levels of light to the woodland floor creating a healthy ground flora and often-splendid displays of bluebell carpets. Ash dominated woodlands are likely to undergo major changes over the next decade due to ash die back disease.

### Coniferous plantation

- 4.26 Planted since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and replacing areas of heathland and oak woodland, extensive coniferous plantation characterises a large central area of upland hills and combes (notably at Great Wood). There are a number of smaller forestry blocks occurring throughout the AONB such as those at Wind Down and St Audries. These plantations provide important habitat for deer, invertebrates and birds and are a valuable recreational and commercial resource. The incorporation in more recent years of significant areas of broadleaf woodland within and on the edge of plantations and conversion to heathland has increased habitat value.

### Small Farm Woodlands

- 4.27 Occurring within the farmed landscape of the Quantock Hills, these smaller scale broadleaf and/or conifer woods are a marked feature amongst pasture and arable land and are often on ancient woodland sites.

## **Coast**

- 4.28 The coastal edge includes foreshore and cliff habitats that support specific ranges of flora and fauna primarily due to the alkaline, limestone cliffs. This area is designated as SSSI largely for its Jurassic geology. Specialised cliff-top biodiversity includes orchids, limestone grassland and invertebrates<sup>25</sup>.

## **Parkland**

- 4.29 The study area contains a number of important parkland landscapes which bring significant habitat value to the area – providing mosaic habitats valued for their trees, especially veteran and ancient trees, and the plants and animals that they

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<sup>24</sup> The name Aisholt is believed to refer to the ash woods that surround the village.

<https://www.quantockonline.co.uk/quantocks/villages/aisholt/aisholt1.html> as seen on 07/09/2019

<sup>25</sup> Source: Quantock Hills AONB Management Plan 2019-2024,

[https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/11909d\\_3806ef2061be4fcc8b684228077ec009.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/11909d_3806ef2061be4fcc8b684228077ec009.pdf)

support<sup>26</sup>. These trees are a significant biological resource for a range of species (many of which occur only in these habitats) particularly insects, lichens and fungi which depend on dead and decaying wood<sup>27</sup>.

### ***Enclosed Farmland***

- 4.30 Enclosed farmland – predominantly improved pasture and arable cropping - makes up, by far, the largest land use type within the QPLS area. The field pattern dates to medieval enclosure and comprises mixed ash, hazel, hawthorn, and oak hedges with localised areas where elm and holly are key contributors to the mix. The hedges provide significant habitat value although this value is thwarted across much of the landscape by insensitive management via flailing. There are some areas where the more traditional practice of hedge laying is starting to make ground but still the majority of hedge lengths are weakened and continuing to decline due to regular and harsh cutting. In the farmed areas close to the coast, the cliff top limestone grassland offers valuable habitat.

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<sup>26</sup> UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Habitat Descriptions (Wood-pasture and parkland) 2011 via:  
[http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/pdf/UKBAP\\_BAPHabitats-65-WoodPastureParkland2011.pdf](http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/pdf/UKBAP_BAPHabitats-65-WoodPastureParkland2011.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

## 5. The Shaping of the Cultural Landscape

### Introduction

- 5.1 Our understanding of how the cultural landscape within the Quantock Hills AONB has evolved has been significantly enhanced by archaeological excavations and extensive research undertaken by Hazel Riley of English Heritage (between 2002 and 2006). This work has been laid out in the book "*The Historic Landscape of the Quantock Hills*".
- 5.2 The information in this Chapter summarises information on pre-historic and historic human activity and its influence on the evolution of the landscape as contained within the Hazel Riley book as referenced above. **Figure 5.1** illustrates the significance of human influence on the landscape as evidence by a large number of designated heritage assets.

### Hunter Gatherers: 500,000-4000 BC (The Palaeolithic and Mesolithic)

- 5.3 The presence of archaic humans who lived and hunted in West Somerset well over 200,000 years ago is indicated by the presence of handaxes in the river gravels in the Doniford area.
- 5.4 There was a glacial period 150,000 – 60,000 years ago when Britain was not occupied by humans due to the Ice Age. The retreat of the ice, which reached as far as South Wales, saw humans and animals return to Britain. Teeth and tusks of extinct woolly mammoths have been found along the coast of the Quantock Hills.
- 5.5 Some 20,000 years ago the British Isles were, once more, virtually covered with ice – the ice reaching as far south as Glamorgan and Norfolk. The landscape of the Quantock Hills at this time was a polar landscape. As the ice left, people returned to Britain and the large flint blades in the Doniford river gravels are evidence that humans were again living in the area during this period.
- 5.6 At the beginning of the present postglacial period – approximately 11,000 years ago - temperatures were probably similar to today and grasslands began giving way to open deciduous woods of oak and hazel and sea levels rose. People who returned to Britain were adapting to a new environment of rapidly developing forests. Approximately 8000 years ago Britain became an island, and the shoreline of the Bristol Channel that we recognise today would have become evident.
- 5.7 The few flint tools of Mesolithic date that have been found on the Quantock Hills indicate that small groups or bands of people were using the uplands of the Quantocks as hunting grounds.

## **Early Farmers: 4000-1750 BC (The Neolithic)**

- 5.8 The beginning of the Neolithic period saw people's first attempts at farming the land. Deciduous woodland still largely covered the area but by the end of the third millennium BC it is likely that the hilltops were a mosaic of clearings in the forest, centred on the great barrow cemeteries of Wills Neck and Black Hill, linked by tracks and paths, marked by pollards and areas of coppice.
- 5.9 The first large-scale structures built by humans also begin to be seen in this period. Battlegore<sup>28</sup> and the footprint of a timber circle west of Taunton, on the edge of the Quantock Hills show that the expanse of lower ground, west of the Quantocks and east of the Brendons, was important in the fourth and early third millennia BC.
- 5.10 The fact that much of the heath areas of the Quantocks was Common Land with a long history of cultivation including stone clearance and ploughing means it is possible that many stone monuments on the Quantock Hills may have been destroyed before they were known about.

## **A Structured Landscape: 1750 BC – 43 AD (The Bronze and Iron Ages)**

- 5.11 By the middle of the second millennium BC a more domestic landscape emerges including the presence of houses, wooden and earthwork enclosures, field clearance cairns and field systems.
- 5.12 The central part of the Quantock Hills can be considered a ritual landscape in the second millennium BC. There is a large body of evidence for burial and ritual in the earlier Bronze Age and barrows and cairns are the most visible and by far the most numerous type of archaeological sites on the Quantock Hills. About 120 have been discovered covering the whole area with many of the largest covering the steep western scarp and still prominent features in the landscape today like the platform cairn on Hurley Beacon. This cairn was used for lighting beacon fires and forms part of a number of Bronze Age burial monuments e.g. the stone cairns of Great Hill, West Hill and Fire Beacon Hill – forming a linear barrow cemetery stretching for nearly 2km from Hurley Beacon to Dead Woman's Ditch<sup>29</sup>.
- 5.13 In the latter part of the second millennium BC the evidence for settlement and enclosure in the landscape becomes more compelling. Linear earthworks (there are six linear earthworks recorded, two of which are directly associated with hillforts (Bicknoller Hill and Ruborough Camp) when seen together and with the distribution of the barrow cemeteries show the true extent of the ritual landscape.

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<sup>28</sup> Quantock Hills AONB Service information leaflet - Recording and Understanding the Historic Landscape of the Quantock Hills  
[https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/11909d\\_f5b691e57d57420e9244ab8e9265930e.pdf?index=true](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/11909d_f5b691e57d57420e9244ab8e9265930e.pdf?index=true)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

- 5.14 There is a small amount of evidence for settlement sites of the earlier Bronze Age to the northeast and south of the Quantock Hills. There are no traces in the archaeological record of houses, only burial monuments, and no extensive Bronze Age field systems and settlements surviving on the Quantock heath. This may be due to later cultivation, and challenging vegetation cover. However, the presence of special places on the hilltops and the large finds of arrowheads recorded indicate that the areas must have been well used during the Bronze Age.
- 5.15 Evidence shows that the Quantock Hills were well used during the Iron Age (from about 750 BC). The landscape was by now well populated with farmsteads, small hamlets, productive arable fields, meadows and woodland, and large areas of upland pasture. The Quantock Hills were in an important strategic location at the end of the first millennium BC: on the edge of the territory of the Dumnonii tribe and close to the territories of both the Dobunni and the Durotriges tribes.
- 5.16 The remains of several spectacular Iron Age sites, once statements of power and prestige, still exist; the Trendle Ring hill-slope enclosure, and three hillforts at Dowsborough Camp and Ruborough Camp and an incomplete enclosure on Bicknoller Hill. Other hill-slope enclosures survive as earthworks and some as cropmarks all around the Quantock Hills, with the notable exception of the coastal strip.
- 5.17 It is possible that much of the higher ground of the Quantock Hills may have been a mixture of heath, scrub and pasture, with wooded valleys providing fuel and building material. South of Wills Neck and Aisholt the gentler topography meant that small farms and fields could be established on the east and west of the hills, while a combination of good farming land and mineral resources encouraged the growth of a dense population around Broomfield and Kingston St Mary in the first millennium BC.

### **A Neglected Landscape: 43-450 AD (Romano British)**

- 5.18 During the past 30 years a large number of new Roman settlement sites have been found using aerial photographs, geophysical survey and excavation in advance of development. The Quantock Hills lay on the very edge of Romanised Somerset but the excavation of samples of cropmarks has shown occupation throughout the Roman period on the south side of the Quantock Hills.
- 5.19 The dominant form of settlement was still the farmstead. There is evidence that the coastal strip was well used, with settlements at Hinkley Point and Doniford, but, surprisingly, no cropmark sites have been recorded so far from the arable fields of the area between Lilstock and West Quantoxhead.
- 5.20 The remains of Spaxton Roman villa were found on the southeast edge of the Quantock Hills, between Enmore and Charlynch. Another small Roman villa has been found at Yarford seven kilometres to the southwest. Just 5km to the

northwest of the villa at Yarford another recent discovery of Roman material has been made, a hoard of 4<sup>th</sup> century Roman silver. Several other large hoards of silver denarii were reported from the vicinity of the Quantock Hills in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### **A Landscape of Retraction and Readjustment: 450 – 700 AD (The Dark Ages)**

- 5.21 The Quantock Hills have, so far, only one site that can be definitely ascribed to this period, the post-Roman cemetery at Stoneage Barton. The burials from Stoneage Barton provide important evidence to add to the small amount of information about the area at this time, suggesting that there was a high-status Dark Age settlement nearby. The presence of the cemetery also hints that there may have been a late Roman shrine or temple site on the hills above.
- 5.22 There is no excavated material to indicate that any of the Iron Age hillforts and enclosures of the Quantock Hills were used in the post-Roman period. There is, however, a small amount of evidence to suggest that Dowsborough Camp and Ruborough Camp were used at this time.
- 5.23 The withdrawal of the Roman imperial administration caused the collapse of the rural economy and political and social disruption ensued. This is seen in the archaeological record at sites such as the Roman villa at Yarford, where the final use of the once grand, mosaic-floored dining room was as a workshop in the late Roman period, and at Maidenbrook Farm and Hinkley Point, where occupation of the farmsteads ended in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD.

### **The Landscape of Development and Expansion: 700 – 1066 AD (Saxon and Medieval)**

- 5.24 The Quantock Hills began to take on their present configuration by this time. The first mention of Quantock 'Forest' is as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The great expanse of Quantock Common in the northern hills was established as part of the Saxon hunting ground and was essentially open heath, but the wooded slopes and combes were more extensive than we see today.
- 5.25 Although mentioned as a Royal Hunting Forest the boundary of the forest is unclear with documentary evidence suggesting that it took in the whole of what is now common land and former common land.
- 5.26 The pattern of land ownership at the time of the Domesday survey shows that the Quantock Hills were still surrounded by royal land and land owned by the church.
- 5.27 Larger estates began to fragment in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and other centres developed, the precursors to the well-documented medieval manors at West and East Quantoxhead, Kilve and Kilton on the coast, for example.

## **A Changing Landscape 1066-1540 (Late Medieval)**

- 5.28 The medieval landscape of the Quantock Hills has survived in remarkable detail in some places. On the coastal strip the buildings at Kilve<sup>30</sup> and the deserted farmsteads of Dens Combe and Deak's Allers are visible survivals of a way of life, centred on the manor and its lord, which has persisted through the centuries in certain places. Life and the landscape of the Quantock Hills in the medieval period were dominated by several manor houses that lay at the heart of large estates. The parishes of West Quantoxhead, East Quantoxhead, Kilve and Kilton roughly equate to the medieval manors of the same names. They influenced the landscape by erecting high status buildings such as castles, manor houses and churches made of timber and stone. They also laid out deer parks, often close to the manor houses, where wood pasture and more open grazing for deer contributed to a managed landscape around the lord's residence. Medieval deer parks have been identified at 12 manors in and around the Quantock Hills. It was (usually) agriculture that provided the driver for the maintenance and expansion of manorial estates and there is some evidence for a certain type of open field farming on and around the Quantock Hills.
- 5.29 However, it is the process of creating a farmstead, carving out the fields from woodland or heath that has left the most lasting impression on the landscape of the Quantock Hills. It is during the medieval period that this process starts to be seen across large parts of the landscape and farmstead and hamlets become the dominant form of settlement in and around the Quantock Hills, with many of them being documented by the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Many of the hamlets and farms around Aisholt and Merridge, connected by narrow lanes and tracks, have their origins in the 11<sup>th</sup> century or earlier. Broomfield parish, too, contains much evidence for the medieval landscape.
- 5.30 Whilst a prosperous period continued following the Norman Conquest the mid to late 14<sup>th</sup> century saw more changes to the landscape that can still be seen today. A deteriorating climate, the Black Death and the collapse of the manorial system caused a huge reduction in population and often much movement of the remaining people. On the lower part of the hills there is evidence that areas of broadleaved woodland grow over medieval fields and much of today's heathland covers the remains of arable fields. Some farming hamlets shrank to individual farmsteads, and strip fields and rough ground began to be enclosed on a piecemeal basis into fields. Small manors continued to develop as a distinctive feature of this landscape.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> A substantial part of the late 13<sup>th</sup> or early 14<sup>th</sup> century manor house still stands at Kilve.

<sup>31</sup> National Character Area Profile: 144 Quantock Hills (2013) Natural England

## **Industry, Agriculture and Emparkment: 1540 - 1900 (Post Medieval)**

- 5.31 The Parliamentary enclosures of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries led to the enclosure of some of the higher land on the Quantock Hills for the first time; having not been enclosed during or since the medieval period. These fields are generally larger and more rectangular than the earlier fields and are often hedged with stone-faced banks topped with beech trees.
- 5.32 From the later medieval and post-medieval periods (16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries specifically) the system of outfields was used on the Quantock Hills. These were areas of temporary cultivation that were worked either in common, or, where individual farms had access to waste, by individual holdings. The relict field systems are the remains of these outfields. The principal crop from the outfields on the Quantock Hills was rye, providing not only a source of grain, but also rye straw for thatch - the most common roofing material for buildings of all kinds until the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- 5.33 Other distinctive features, locally known as such as catchwater meadows, can be seen on the Quantock Hills particularly to the south. In the area around Broomfield nearly every farm has a catchwater meadow - a system of gutters were used to distribute flowing water evenly over the surface of the meadow to prevent freezing in winter and encourage early growth in spring, providing extra feed for livestock.
- 5.34 During this post-medieval period the Quantock Hills further developed as a working landscape supporting many different industries. The presence of lime industry is documented in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and as early as 1652 in Aisholt. There is evidence for some 23 lime kilns on the Quantock Hills some of which still survive in various states such as the restored structure on Hawkridge Common. Substantial Limestone quarries existed at Hawkridge Common and at Kiln Close. There were also many smaller quarries that once supplied road stone and building material. The most developed sites are on the western side of the hills, with examples at West Quantoxhead, Halsway and Triscombe. The latter two were created in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and Triscombe did not close until the late 1990s.
- 5.35 There is some evidence to suggest that copper and possibly iron was mined in small quantities in and around the hills in the medieval and early post-medieval periods. Two main areas were around Dodington (where two engine houses are still visible) and in the Broomfield area. Charcoal burning platforms are numerous within the wooded combes - around Holford for example where charcoal burning was a major industry - and documentary evidence suggests that blocks of woodland were sold to itinerant charcoal burners. Oak bark was used in the many tanneries and there were perhaps as many as 12 tanneries in the Quantock Hills in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The fast flowing streams that drain the Quantock Hills were also responsible for the growth in the rural textile industry, which was well established in

and around the Quantock Hills by the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Buildings connected with the textile industry remain at Holford and at Marsh Mills, Over Stowey.

- 5.36 Ornamental landscapes were also being developed at this time and substantial deer parks were developed, many of which were the basis of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century landscape parks and still survive as parkland today. One of the most dramatic was the extensive emparkment around St Audries which began in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century after more than 100 years of diverting roads, planting trees and moving the old village of West Quantoxhead from between the manor house and the medieval church to its present site. It was also probably during this time that the tree ring enclosures were constructed on the heathland.

### **Modern times: 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

- 5.37 The major impact on the area during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the establishment of extensive coniferous plantations in the wake of the First World War. This resulted in damage to the archaeological landscape as well as changing the habitat balance and character of the landscape. While in some areas woodland has damaged archaeological interest, there will be other situations where the presence of woodland may have reduced the impact of even more damaging agricultural operations.
- 5.38 West Somerset's most important roles during the Second World War were to provide artillery training ranges and areas for the concentration of American troops and equipment during the run up to D-Day. A large storage depot was located at Norton Fitzwarren, US Army hospitals at Sandhill Park and Norton Camp (now the base for 40 Commando, Royal Marines), and large camps for US troops, housed in huts and in tents, at Crowcombe Heathfield, Doniford Camp, Alfoxton and Hestercombe (Hawkins 1996)<sup>32</sup>. Doniford had become an artillery range training site and camp in 1925, closing in the late 1950s and the site is now a holiday park. At West Kilton Farm the remains of a tank training range (including brick buildings and concrete bases) can still be seen. The Quantock Hills were also used for training the Home Guard. Prisoner of War camps were located at Bridgwater, Norton Fitzwarren and at Goathurst Camp, Halswell House (Hawkins 1996).
- 5.39 During and after the Second World War, there were rapid changes in agriculture as farmers were encouraged to increase production resulting in the agricultural improvement of grassland and the reduction of permanent pasture. Remnant species-rich pastures are now rare and fragmented, only being found on a few of the steeper slopes within some of the combs. During the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a shift towards conversion of remaining grassland to arable crops on the coastal side of the hills, leading to deterioration and removal of hedgerow boundaries.

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<sup>32</sup> Hawkins, M (1996) Somerset at War 1939-1945. Bridgwater. Hawk (as referenced in Riley, H – The Historic Landscape of The Quantock Hills)

5.40 More recent pressures on the landscape of the Quantock Hills are dealt with in **Chapter 19 – Forces for change.**



## 6. The Character of the Quantock Landscape

6.1 The review of the Draft Quantock Hills AONB landscape character assessment, combined with an assessment of the wider landscape setting has resulted in a landscape character map (**Figure 6.1**) which identifies 12 Landscape Character Types across the QLPS area. These Landscape types are:

- River Valley and Agricultural Fringe
- Agricultural Fringe to Coast
- Arable Plateaux
- Enclosed Wooded Combes
- Forested Hills and Combes (4 Landscape Character Areas)
- Heathland Hills and Combes
- Lowland Hills to Combes
- Open Hills (2 Landscape Character Areas)
- Rolling Farmland and Settled Combes
- Wooded and Farmed Escarpment
- Agricultural Foothills
- Jurassic Coast

6.2 Detailed descriptions and evaluations for the each of these landscape types is provided in the following chapters. For each Landscape Character Type the following information is provided:

- **Location and boundaries** - a description of where the landscape occurs and what defines its extent in the landscape;
- **Key characteristics** - those features and elements (and combination of both) that make up the character of the landscape;
- **Description** - a detailed description considering perceptual, natural and cultural aspects of the landscape to give an all-encompassing impression of the character of the place;

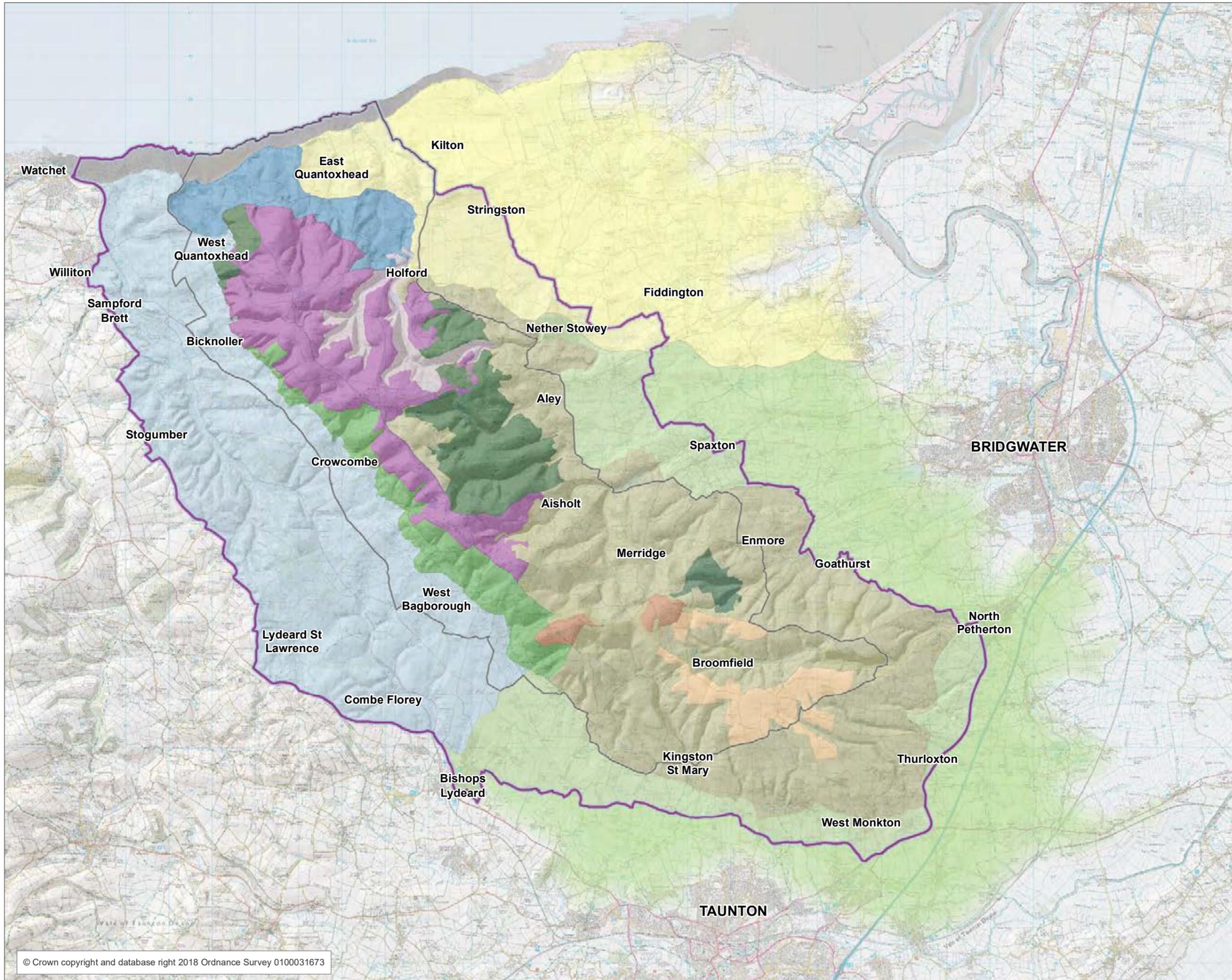
- **Designations** – a table of nature conservation and historic environment designations;
- **Evaluation** - a judgement of the strength of landscape character and condition as well as identifying issues and opportunities; and
- **Landscape Vision and Future Management** – a summary for managing the landscape working towards optimum character and condition into the future.

## **Consultation**

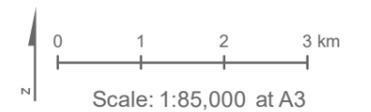
6.3 The Quantock Hills AONB Landscape Character Assessment project and the Landscape Character Types and Landscape Character Areas were presented to stakeholders and interested parties at a Quantock Landscape Partnership event on 5<sup>th</sup> February 2019 at Spaxton Village Hall. There were some 65 attendees who had the opportunity to look at and comment on the draft Landscape Character map. The meeting endorsed the proposed Landscape Character Types as a good representation of the landscape's varied characteristics.

**QUANTOCK LANDSCAPE PARTNERSHIP SCHEME**  
**LANDSCAPE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT**

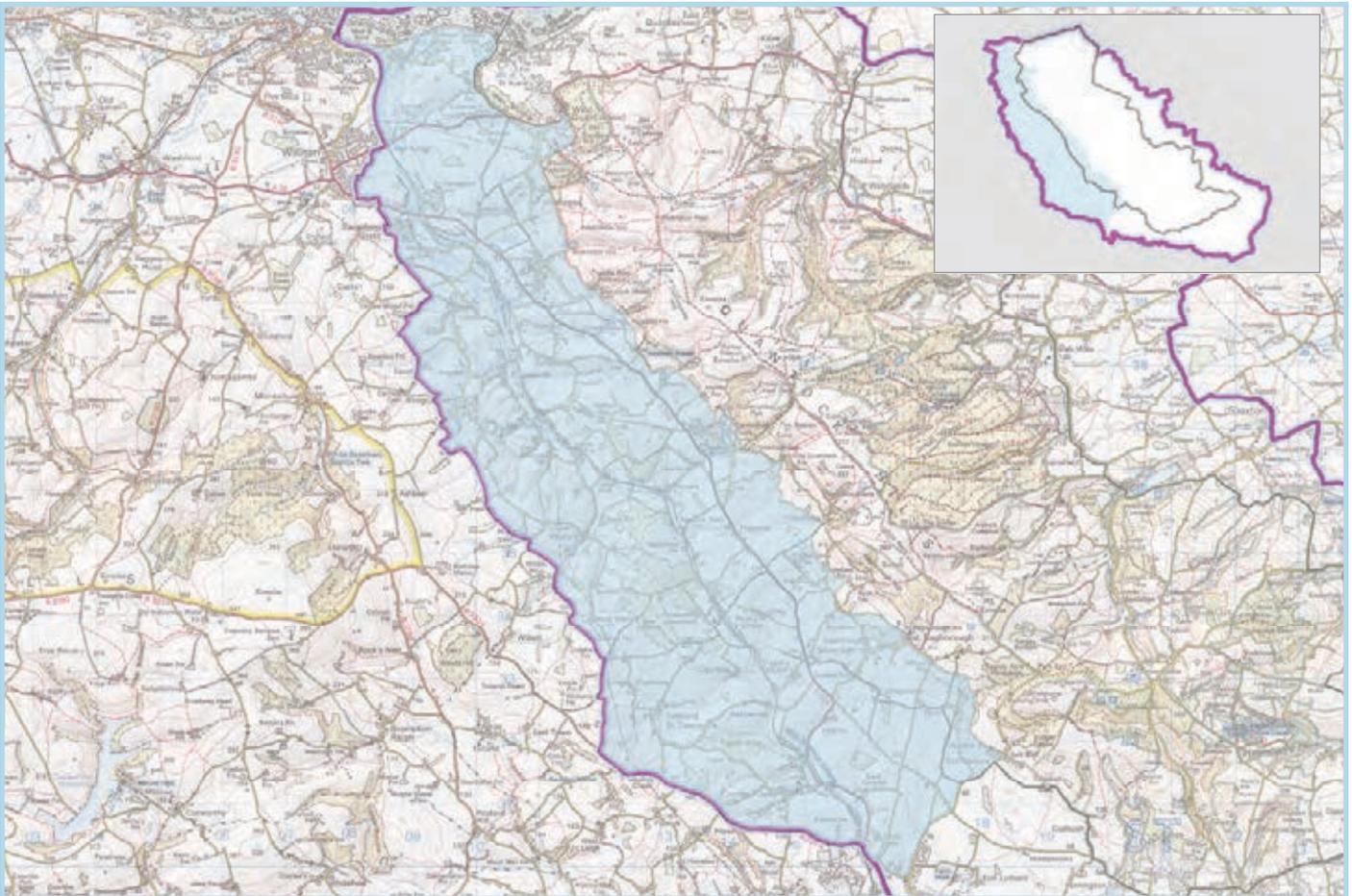
**Figure \* .1:**  
**Landscape Character Map**



- Quantock Hills AONB
- Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme Area (the Study Area)
- Landscape Character Types**
- River Valley and Agricultural Fringe
- Agricultural Fringe to Coast
- Arable Plateaux
- Enclosed Wooded Combes
- Forested Hills and Combes
- Heathland Hills and Combes
- Lowland Hills to Coast
- Open Hills
- Rolling Farmland and Settled Combes
- Wooded and Farmed Escarpment
- Agricultural Foothills
- Jurassic Coast



**COOKSON & TICKNER**  
 LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE



## Key Characteristics

- Distinctive **agricultural fringe at the foot of the scarp slope** - skirting the hills and merging with the undulating valley landscape.
- **Scarp slope forms a striking and immediate backdrop** – imparting its character on the valley.
- **Numerous tributary streams** (forming tight combes) **run towards the Doniford River**.
- **Convolved, complex landform** of rounded hills, deep combes and flat valley floor.
- Underlain by sedimentary bedrock **mudstone, sandstone, breccias and conglomerates (Triassic period)** and **Permian sandstone**.
- Outcropping conglomerate and breccias that have been exploited for their lime component (**disused lime kilns survive in the landscape**).
- **A well-wooded landscape** – deciduous, mixed and coniferous plantation bounded in parts by distinctive beech hedgebanks.
- **Villages and hamlets nestle at the head of the deep combe valleys**, cut by tributary streams.
- **Narrow, often sunken, lanes** with banks cloaked in ferns.
- **Changing landform reveals surprise views** of the impressive scarp slope and heathland hills.
- **West Somerset Railway line and its numerous stations** – popular with tourists and local visitors.
- **An enclosed landscape of fields typically bounded by tightly flailed, gappy hedges**. In places arable conversion has seen hedges reduced to almost nothing.
- **Dairying, stock rearing and 'horsiculture'** evident as well as **arable production** – especially on gentler slopes close to the valley floor.
- **Prominent country houses with associated designed parkland and pleasure grounds**.
- **The main arterial route of the A358 runs through the valley**.
- **Pylons towers and overhead lines** are prominent.

# River Valley and Agricultural Fringe



## 7. River Valley and Agricultural Fringe

### Location and boundaries

- 7.1 This is one of the largest landscape character types occurring within the study area - forming part of the relatively narrow band of rolling hills and valleys that separate the two nationally designated landscapes of Exmoor National Park and the Quantock Hills AONB. Forming much of the western side of the QLPS area, the Doniford **River Valley and Agricultural Fringe** occurs at the foot of the *Wooded and Farmed Escarpment* and the *Heathland Hills and Combes*. It is a narrow band of relatively steep land that immediately flanks these two higher landscape types, such there is a distinctive agricultural fringe at the foot of the hills that forms the steeper, upper side of this valley landscape surrounding the River Doniford. The Doniford **River Valley and Agricultural Fringe** stretches from the Jurassic Coast in the north, where the river meets the sea, to the inland landscape around the village of Bishops Lydeard, where the valley merges to form part of the wider Vale of Taunton Deane. Its western boundary is defined principally by a change in underlying geology and topographic form – the latter directly affecting views to, and the perceptual relationship with, the Quantock landscape.

### Description

- 7.2 The Doniford **River Valley and Agricultural Fringe** is a landscape of complex topography where the steeper valley sides give way to a dramatically sinuous and rounded landform of tight, wooded combes and a flat, relatively narrow floodplain rising to a landform of pronounced rounded hillocks or knolls – the combined picture creating a wide undulating valley of great visual diversity. Narrow, winding sunken lanes whose banks are cloaked with ferns rise out of the combes to reveal magnificent views of the prominent escarpment and heathland hills of the Quantocks. Areas of higher ground allow, in places, for views down through the valley to the Bristol Channel. The varied landform and presence of the River is fittingly reflected in the place names found throughout e.g. Crowcombe, Combe Florey, Vexford, Lawford, Coleford Water and there is repeating theme of place names prefixed with Higher or Lower, reflecting their respective positions or elevations in the valley.
- 7.3 The agricultural fringe, forming the upper reaches of this valley landscape, occurs at the foot of the Quantock upland landscapes (at approximately 225m AOD) and is characterised by an apron of enclosed agricultural land - predominantly pasture, enclosed by hedges with hedgerow trees - sitting beneath the pronounced *Wooded and Farmed Escarpment* and the *Heathland Hills and Combes*. The evenly sloping ground of this fringe landscape is undulating; cut by a number of small

streams that issue from steep combs above, forming shallow depressions across the farmland as they run towards the main watercourse of the Doniford River.



Figure 7.1 Agricultural fringe at the foot of the heathland landscape gently giving way to the valley (left) and views across the valley to the distinctive western scarp (right).

- 7.4 The intricate and convoluted landform of this valley landscape is underlain by Triassic geology of Vexford Breccias<sup>33</sup>, Aylesbeare Mudstone Group, Chester Formation Conglomerate (previously known as Budleigh Salterton Pebble Beds<sup>34</sup>) and Helsby Sandstone Formation (previously known as Otter Sandstone<sup>35</sup>). Wiveliscombe Sandstone of the Permian period defines the geology for the far west of the valley. Helsby Sandstone and Wiveliscombe Sandstone is used throughout the valley in buildings and walls. The presence of distinctive limekilns reflects the exploitation of the limestone clasts in the outcropping Chester Formation Conglomerate<sup>36</sup> burned for the production of lime as a soil improver for agriculture. The geology of the area gives rise to well drained, coarse loamy, slightly acidic soils. These soils are associated with the stock rearing and dairying typical of this landscape although it is apparent that many areas of traditional pasture have been converted to arable cropping.



Figure 7.2 Lime Kiln (left) and sandstone walls (right) – both Combe Florey.

<sup>33</sup> Breccia and conglomerate are very similar rocks. They are both clastic sedimentary rocks composed of particles larger than two millimeters in diameter. The difference is in the shape of the large particles. In breccia the large particles are angular in shape, but in conglomerate the particles are rounded. Information via <https://geology.com/rocks/breccia.shtml>.

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.bgs.ac.uk/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?pub=HEY>

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> The limestone pebbles were burned for the production of lime which, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was increasingly recognised as a soil improver.

- 7.5 Farms are dotted across the valley – typically sat at the head of one of the many combes whose tributary streams wind their way towards the valley floor. Settlements and hamlets are also located just below the head of the tributary valleys, close to the source of the issuing spring e.g. Lydeard St Lawrence and Stogumber. In addition to the farms and villages, the other key development feature within the valley is the West Somerset Railway<sup>37</sup> whose, line, stations, bridges and associated infrastructure are repeating, novel characteristics. The railway is one of the defining features of the valley and a popular attraction with tourists and local day visitors. Much of the railway line sits close to the course of the river in the valley floor.



Figure 7.3 White rendered cottages at Stogumber (left) and West Somerset Railway near Crowcombe Heathfield (right)

- 7.6 This is a wooded and well-treed landscape - deciduous mixed and plantation woodland are found throughout, typically on the valley sides with the latter largely concentrated around Crowcombe Heathfield, bounded by outgrown beech hedgebanks. With the woodland comes a change in scale where views are limited and there is a marked sense of enclosure. There are a number of Ancient Woodland Sites including the largest - Combe Wood - located between Lydeard St Lawrence and Combe Florey. Native, moisture-loving trees occur adjacent to the watercourses. Plantation woodlands appear as dark prominent features above the broadleaf canopies and somewhat at odds, visually, with the otherwise typically organic shape of the landscape and its more muted hues. This is also true of miscanthus (or elephant grass) crops grown sporadically on flatter areas, and similarly forming strong geometric lines in the landscape.

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<sup>37</sup> The Act for the West Somerset Railway Company (WSR) received Royal Assent in 1857 and Brunel was appointed as its first engineer. He died in 1859 (Haggett, P (2012) The Quantocks).



Figure 7.4 Geometric lines of coniferous plantations and miscanthus crops (left) contrasting with the typically organic shapes and muted hues of the of the valley (right). Note the near-loss of the boundary hedge separating the field from the lane (left).

- 7.7 This is a farmed landscape of both pasture and arable cropping as well as land given over to horse grazing and recreation. Hedgerow management through hedge laying is evident within the valley but vast lengths of hedgerows are short cut and tightly flailed and in some places cut to nothing where arable land use has negated the need for stock proofing.
- 7.8 Roads are typically characterised by rural lanes, often sunken, that cut down into the valley floor – with river crossing points typically marked by sandstone bridges. The presence of the A358, cutting as it does northwest to southeast through the valley is apparent, more so aurally than visually – often hidden from view by the folding landform.
- 7.9 Villages include Stogumber, Combe Florey, Sampford Brett, Lydeard St Lawrence, Bicknoller, Crowcombe and West Bagborough for example. There is also an extensive scattering of hamlets such as Treble’s Holford, Flaxpool and Westowe. Here, there is a relatively consistent use of sandstone and rendered buildings with slate and clay tiles as well as thatch define the cottages, farms and outbuildings and the many walls that mark the edge of the settlement. Some modern agricultural buildings loom large over the more intimate scale of the traditional farms. In some places modern properties within the landscape are atypical of the local vernacular and the traditional siting of building well into the folds of the valley.
- 7.10 There are a number of prominent country houses including Crowcombe Court, Triscombe House and Halsway Manor, which occupy commanding positions on the agricultural fringe, nestled at the bottom of the hills to exploit enviable views across to the Brendon Hills and the Exmoor National Park beyond. Combe Wood Tower stands prominent on the other side of the valley. The listed building and large country house of Bagborough House (with its surrounding parkland landscape extending onto the scarp) forms part of the West Bagborough Conservation Area. To the east (at the transition with the Agricultural Foothills landscape) is the listed building of Cothelstone Manor with its surrounding gardens, pleasure grounds and park. Cothelstone Park contains a listed lodge house, a lake and number of mature

specimen trees. In the west is Triscombe House, just south of the hamlet of Triscombe. Weacombe Estate is located near West Quantoxhead. These four large estates and their surrounding parklands exert a sense of grand design on the landscape and are typical of the landscapes skirting the edge of the ‘hills’.

- 7.11 The sound of water is evident throughout the valley such that there is a sensory connection to the tributary streams and main watercourse of the Doniford River even when not in sight.
- 7.12 Where the Doniford Valley meets the sea at Doniford, there is a change in underlying geology to Lias (limestone, shales and mudstone) – evident in bridges and buildings. Here, there is a strong sense of being at the coastal edge not least because of views but also due to the influence of tourism with holiday parks and associated activities.

<b>Nature Conservation Designations</b>	
Ancient Woodland (Total area)	82.28ha
SAC	Exmoor & Quantock Oakwoods (11.68ha)
SSSI	The Quantocks (16.95ha)
	Roebuck Meadows (3.55)
	Blue Anchor to Lilstock Coast (13.06)
<b>Historic Environment Designations</b>	
Listed Buildings	Grade I (8)
	Grade II* (18)
	Grade II (180)
Registered Park and Gardens	St Audries (Grade II)
	Crowcombe Court (Grade II)
	Cothelstone Manor (II)
Scheduled Monuments	5

## Evaluation

- 7.13 The distinctive agricultural fringe adjacent to the heathland and scarp gives way to a wooded valley whose combination of enclosed farmland, picturesque sandstone villages, tributary valleys, the West Somerset Railway, large country houses, and quality views across to dramatic scarp of the Quantock Hills makes for a landscape of **strong** character overall.

7.14 The visible **condition** of this landscape is judged to be **moderate**. Some notable features noted as reducing landscape condition overall area the loss (and poor management) of hedgerows which has weakened the landscape pattern (evident for example where miscanthus and other arable crops have negated the need for stock proofing) and there is a decline of the distinctive beech hedgebanks. Heritage features such as the lime kilns are not in a favourable state. These points are noted in the table below.

### Issues and Opportunities

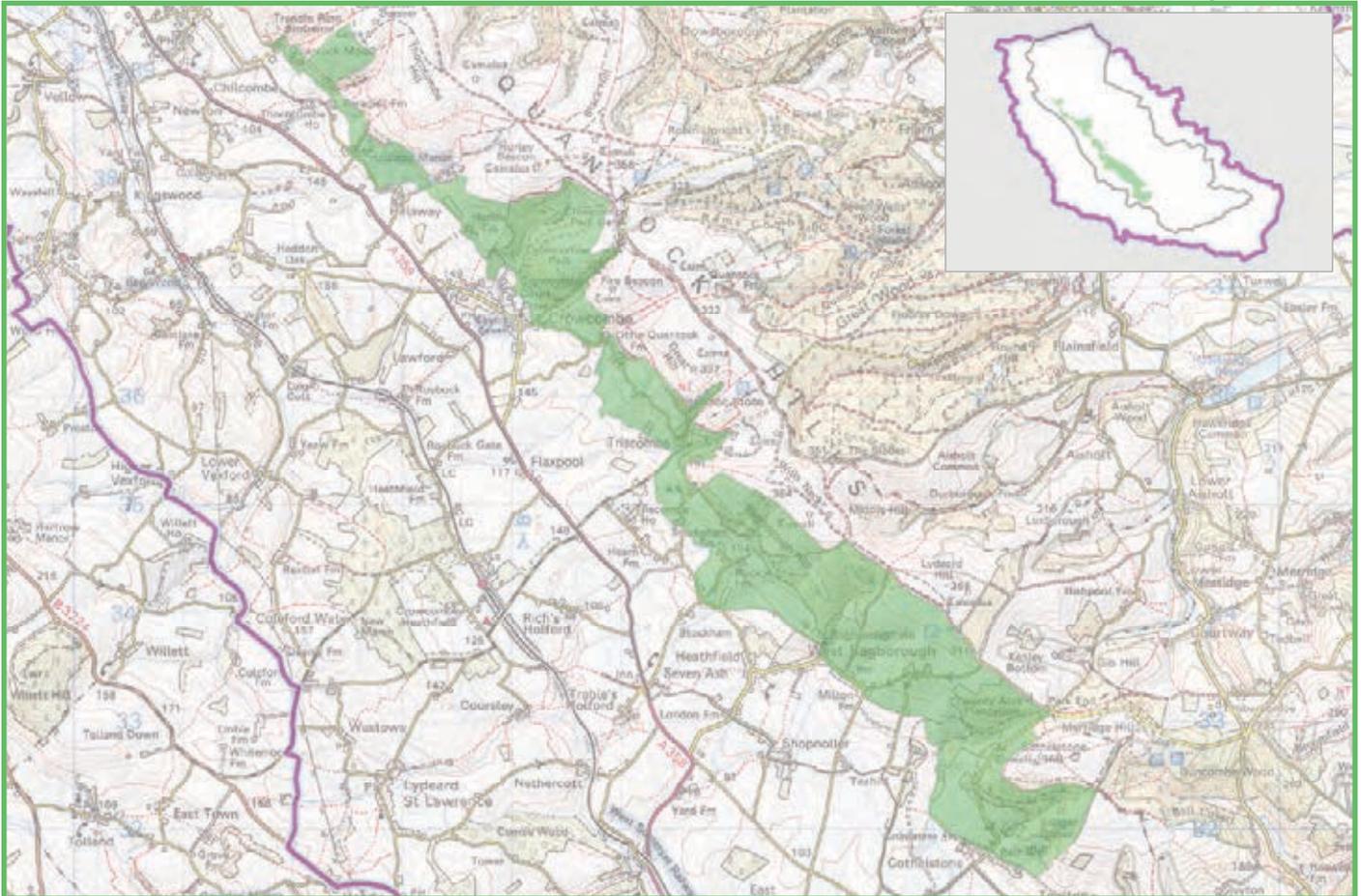
- Pressure of the A358 where it borders the landscape - signage, highways infrastructure, lighting etc. are cluttering features that detract from the rural character of the landscape. Opportunities to engage with Local Planning Authority and Somerset Highways to develop measures for sensitive highways treatments to be implemented through policy and guidance.
- Conversion of pasture to arable cultivation leading to the decline/loss of hedgerows and a resultant weakening of landscape pattern. Some hedgerows are being laid and opportunities should be sought to roll out this approach across the valley to greatly enhance the landscape structure and biodiversity value.
- Construction of large agricultural buildings - the size and siting of which does not respond the small scale character of the farmsteads or the scale of this intricate landscape. Opportunities for the AONB Service to engage with the Local Planning Authority regarding agricultural building guidance.
- Prominent pylon lines – dominate some views and detract from scenic quality.
- Change of use of agricultural land to horse keeping and associated paraphernalia (such as taped fields field shelters, jumps) as well as poaching of the soil due to areas of overgrazing.
- Potential for novelty elements of the West Somerset Railway to spill over into the wider landscape.
- Intrusiveness of tourist related activities and infrastructure at Doniford where the valley shares similar management issues as the *Agricultural Foothills to Coast* e.g. static caravans/mobile homes on sloping ground (affecting views to hills from coast) and new infrastructure associated with access to the England Coast Path).
- New domestic properties not responding to the traditional (discreet) pattern of settlement.
- Opportunities to conserve, enhance and restore the historic designed landscapes (e.g. through unified management approach or grant funding such as Countryside Stewardship).

- Conversion of modern agricultural buildings to domestic use – domesticating historically unsettled parts of the valley. Opportunities for the AONB Service to engage with the Local Planning Authority regarding guidance for re-use of agricultural buildings.
- Potential future in-field solar energy developments – threatening both landscape character and quality of views. Opportunities to work with Exmoor National Park and Local Planning Authority regarding policy and guidance for renewable energy schemes in the setting of the protected landscapes.
- Issues of increased rainfall and run off from the adjacent hills resulting in more flooding.
- Miscanthus (elephant grass) affects visual experience e.g. restricting previously open views. Opportunities to consider a 'views from public footpaths' project to monitor seasonal change to views post and pre harvest.
- Declining condition of heritage signposts. Opportunities for development of community projects to restore iconic cast iron signs.
- Outgrown and declining beech hedgebanks. Opportunities to explore grant funding to implement management approach to ensure the trees are varied in age and size to ensure longevity of the banks into the future.
- Plantation woodland appears as dark blocks against the otherwise muted hues of the valley. There are opportunities for broadleaf planting to soften harsh edges.

## **Landscape Vision and Future Management**

The vision for the future of the **River Valley and Agricultural Fringe** is to enhance the condition of this landscape and conserve its overriding character as a small-scale riverine landscape of mixed farming bound by dense hedgerows (and hedgerow trees) interspersed with woodland, small combe villages, farmsteads and country houses and the heritage line of the West Somerset Railway. The striking contrast between this farmed landscape and the dramatic scarp backdrop should continue to be a spectacle, as should the high quality views across to the Brendons and the wider Exmoor National Park. Towards the coast, at Doniford, additional tourism and recreation should respond to the sensitivity of the landscape to ensure visual amenity and setting to the hills is not compromised by associated development and land use change.

# Wooded and Farmed Escarpment



## Key Characteristics

- **Steep scarp slope** with areas cloaked in **dense woodland** – mixed, broadleaf and coniferous plantation.
- Prominent **smooth crest skyline** with outgrown **beech hedges forming striking silhouettes**.
- **Dramatic landform** steeply ascending from the adjacent, lower lying valley and, conversely, dropping sharply away from the upland areas of heath.
- **Convolved and sinuous scarp face** – streams having carved combs into the slopes - forming natural hollows where **hamlets nestle at the foot of the main break of slope** at the transition to the Doniford River Valley.
- **Significant variation in elevation reflecting the steepness of the slope** – from approximately 100m AOD reaching as high as 350m AOD in places.
- **Pasture intersperses the wooded areas**, forming areas of enclosed farmland amongst the dense woodland.
- Underlain by a geology of **red sandstone (Hangman and Lynton Formations) of the Devonian period**; giving rise to **freely draining and slightly acidic loamy soils**.
- A significant amount of the scarp **forms part of the Quantocks SSSI – woodland, scrub and heathland and upland acid grassland**.
- Settlement within the landscape is limited to **scattered farmsteads with villages and large country houses occurring below the scarp at the break of the slope**.
- **Vestiges of designed landscapes occur on the scarp** where estates extend on to the steep slope to the north of their associated country house.
- **Open areas provide extensive views** across the low-lying vale and beyond.
- **Dramatic views** across the face of the scarp **travelling along the A358**.

# Wooded and Farmed Escarpment



## 8. Wooded and Farmed Escarpment

### Location and boundaries

- 8.1 Occurring on the west side of the hills, the **Wooded and Farmed Escarpment** is easily identifiable - being the dramatic steep scarp face that separates the *Doniford Valley and Agricultural Fringe* from the upland area of the *Heathland Hills and Combes*. The scarp stretches northwest to southeast from the edge of the village of Bicknoller to the edge of Cothelstone. For much of its length the scarp runs parallel to the busy route of the A358. It sits wholly inside the AONB boundary.

### Description

- 8.2 The **Wooded and Farmed Escarpment** is a dramatic and instantly recognisable landscape defined by a steep scarp slope cut by a series of narrow steep combes and cloaked with large areas of woodland cover (with areas of scrub and heathland).
- 8.3 Whilst it is the most notable land cover across the scarp, woodland does not provide blanket coverage; being instead interspersed with enclosed agricultural land - predominantly hedged pasture due to the steepness of the slope being unfavourable to mechanisation. The field pattern is typically characterised by small units of irregular shape that range in age (in terms of their enclosure) but date as far back to pre-17th century. These farmed areas – and the odd farmhouse - typically occur in the mid to lower reaches of the scarp with the woodland generally clinging to the upper slopes. In these farmed areas, the scarp opens up to reveal extensive views out across the Vale of Taunton Deane and beyond. Of the views looking west from the scarp, Berta Lawrence wrote:

*On the western side the landscape is more striking, a huge and generous sweep of country taking in the Vale of Taunton Deane – chocolate soil, lush meadows, orchards, farms – the rougher slopes of Brendon Hills, and beyond the Brendons the great soft curves and soft colours of undulating Exmoor. To your left, as you face westwards, the Blackdown Hills cut a deep blue arc beyond the Vale of Taunton.*

*Berta Lawrence in Quantock Country (1952) – describing the view from Bagborough Hill.*

- 8.4 On the very steep ground at the top of the slope the gradients are such that farming hasn't been viable and here, moorland spills over from the heathland hills above.



Figure 8.1 Heathland spilling over onto the face of the scarp (left) and view across the Vale of Taunton Deane coming down the scarp along Terhill Lane.

- 8.5 Running parallel to, and set back from, the A358 the scarp is clearly visible from this main arterial route between Taunton and Minehead and is an impressive and imposing landform.
- 8.6 From approximately 100m AOD, at the edge of the *River Valley and Agricultural Fringe*, the scarp reaches a maximum height of around 350m AOD where it meets with the *Heathland Hills and Combes* surrounding the prominent trig point at Wills Neck (the highest point on the hills). At Bagborough Hill, the scarp is separated from the summit by outgrown beech hedge banks. These are visual references to parliamentary enclosures that historically took in upper sections of the scarp. The strong lines of now mature beech stands are a distinctive feature; forming characteristic silhouettes on the skyline as well as cutting down across the contours of the slope such as south of Lydeard Hill. Whilst the beech hedges remain, much of the land has reverted back to rough heath and scrub - having a transitional or heathland fringe character. In some areas, such as at Quantock Moor the rough pasture has been improved and is a notable bright green colour contrast on the slopes.
- 8.7 The scarp is cut by a series of short, narrow and steep combes, such as at Grub Bottom and Paradise. It is at the foot of these combes that settlement is typically found sheltering along the spring line at the base of the scarp - as reflected in the village names of Triscombe and Crowcombe. The *Wooded and Farmed Escarpment* also includes a number of designed landscapes. Large country houses shelter at the base of the slope (within the *Doniford River Valley and Agricultural Fringe* landscape type) e.g. Cothelstone, Crowcombe Court and Bagborough House. The remnant medieval deer parks, later pleasure grounds, scattered parkland trees and plantations, belonging to these estates, extend up onto the scarp and create a strong wooded character overall.



Figure 8.2 Parkland, plantation and designed landscape of Bagborough House (left) and Crowcombe Park (right) extending onto the escarpment (First edition six inch OS 1891. Copyright The British Library Board).

- 8.8 There are three areas of significant areas of woodland cover across the scarp face:
- Bagborough Plantation - covering the upper slopes north of Bagborough House, wrapping around the bottom of Bagborough Hill and extending northwards to cover the tight valley sides at Triscombe.
  - Crowcombe Park – mixed woodland that extends northeast through the combes above Crowcombe Court and meeting with the *Heathland Hills and Combes* landscape between Hurley Beacon and Crowcombe Park Gate.
  - The western perimeter of Cothelstone Hill - flanked by a connected series of woodlands - Twenty Acre Plantation, Old Plantation and Paradise. Forming part of the Cothelstone Estate this is managed as commercial woodland.
- 8.9 Highways within this landscape are secondary roads and lanes that typically cut across the contours; creating dramatic ascents and descents between the low lying agricultural land and the main Quantock ridge above.
- 8.10 The land cover of mixed woodland, scrub and heathland found across the scarp forms the south eastern extent of The Quantocks SSSI – an extensive area of semi-natural habitat that contains a wide variety of habitats including dry dwarf-shrub heath, acidic flushes, ancient semi-natural broadleaved woodland and dense scrub.
- 8.11 The scarp is predominantly underlain by Devonian sandstone (The Hangman formation – previously known as Trentishoe Grits) with a localised area of slates and sandstones (Lynton Formation) west of West Bagborough. The sandstone of the Hangman Formation was extracted at the previously worked commercial quarry at Triscombe (which ceased operation 1999). The quarry is evident in distant views – forming a large concave scar across the face of the scarp, revealing the rich red of the underlying stone. Since operations ceased, Peregrine falcons can often be seen flying above the combe here.
- 8.12 The **Wooded and Farmed Escarpment** is a striking and visually vulnerable landscape; its physical geography is impressive and provides a notable sense of containment and a strong backdrop to the Vale of Taunton Deane.

<b>Nature Conservation Designations</b>	
Ancient Woodland Total area (ha)	119.00
SSI	The Quantocks (243.62ha)
<b>Historic Environment Designations</b>	
Listed Buildings	Grade II* (3)
	Grade II (20)
Registered Park and Gardens	Crowcombe Court (Grade II)
	Cothelstone Manor (II)
Scheduled Monuments	1

## Evaluation

- 8.13 A landscape of **strong** character – the distinctive landform of steep scarp slope and open ridgeline, the dense woodland cover shrouding much of the slope, hedge-enclosed pasture, heathland edge mosaic, lines of mature beech stands, tight combs, and large country estates extending up from the base of the slope, all combine to form a remarkable landscape scene of many special qualities.
- 8.14 Overall the landscape appears to be in **moderate to good condition**. The beech hedge banks are such a distinctive feature but their age and fragility is threatening large-scale loss, which would lead to dramatic landscape change. Improving the condition of historic landscapes would improve landscape structure and fabric overall.

## Issues and Opportunities

- Potential development of vertical structures such as communication masts, which would break the largely uninterrupted crest of the scarp.
- Development on the open (farmed) areas of the scarp (including expansion of existing farms and large agricultural buildings). Additional structures, even small scale, in these visually vulnerable agricultural areas could be eye catching and
- Over-maturity and loss of prominent beech trees. Opportunities to explore grant funding to implement management approach to ensure the trees are varied in age and size.
- Future management of scrubby transitional heath on upper slopes.
- Improvement of pasture has created more visually prominent areas of the scarp and reduced

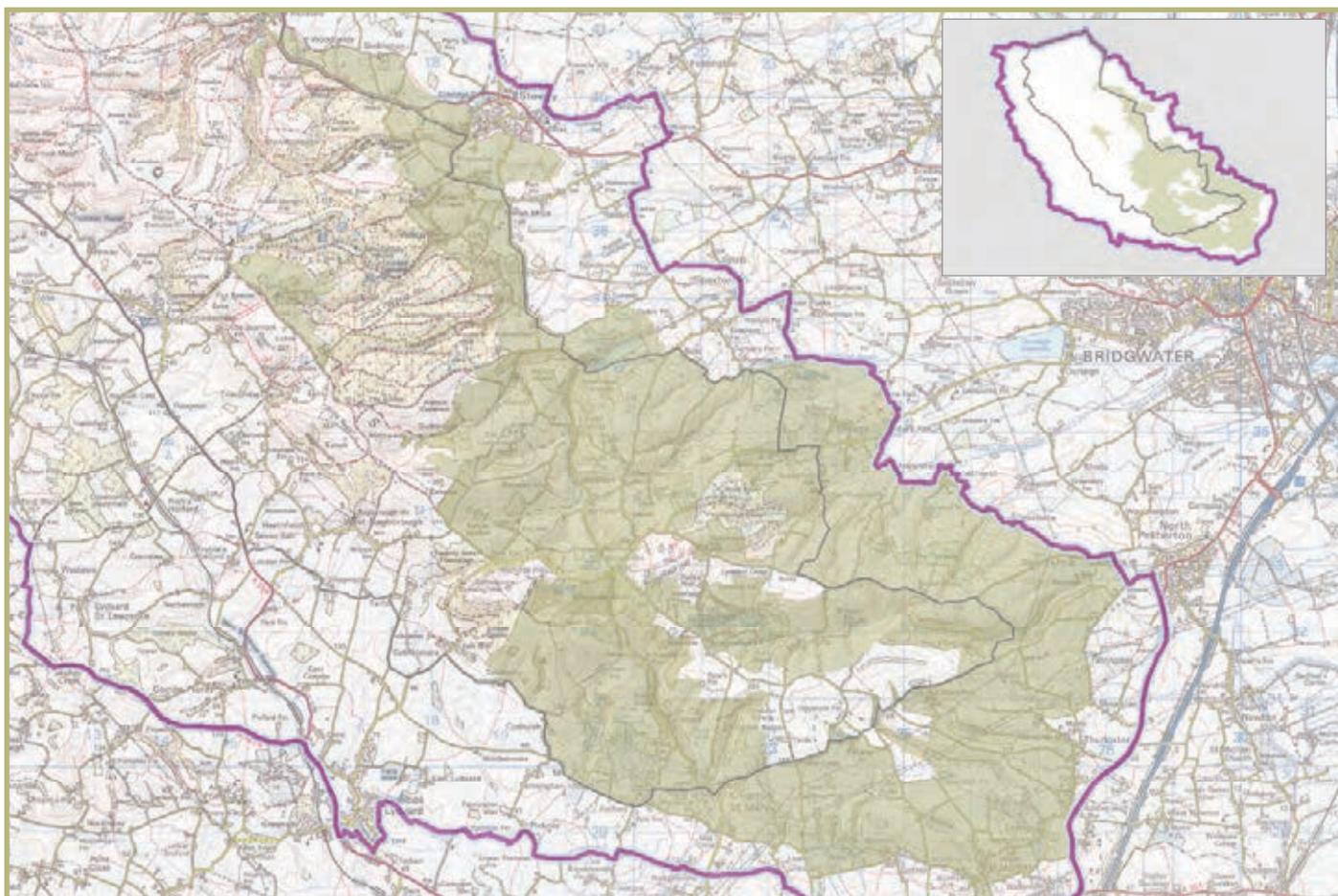
detracting.

- Loss or decline of features of the historic parkland landscapes and dilution of the designed landscape as a key feature.
  - Potential adverse change to landscape character and quality of views due to development in the lower slopes of the Vale of Taunton Deane.
  - Opportunities to reconnect the designed landscape under one ownership or unified management approach.
  - Declining condition of cast iron heritage signposts.
  - Increase water runoff from the hills across the scarp, leading to flooding on lower ground.
- biodiversity in these areas.
  - Features and elements associated with lower-lying landscapes (such as development in the foothills) spilling up and onto the scarp; having the potential to dilute the dramatic juxtaposition and the striking contrast in character.
  - Potential future operations at Triscombe Quarry and/or uncertainty over alternative future uses of the site. Opportunities for project that would bring landscape enhancement, community engagement and improve biodiversity.
  - Unfavourable (although recovering) condition of the SSSI landscape.
  - Potential for camping/glamping on the scarp (potential increase in light pollution and reduction in tranquillity at the edge of the heathland).

## **Landscape Vision and Future Management**

The vision is to conserve and enhance the scarp slope - maintaining the mixed land cover of woodland, interspersed by areas of hedged pasture and the designed landscapes of the country estates. The landscape should continue to be largely free of development (to protect the seamless, largely uninterrupted quality of the dramatic scarp face) and the open, undeveloped ridgeline should be fiercely protected from intrusive development that would detract from the skyline. Active management of beech hedge banks is required to improve their longevity in the landscape.

# Rolling Farmland and Settled Combes



## Key Characteristics

- A landscape of **strongly articulated, rounded hills and long low ridges cut by steeply incised combes**.
- Underlying **geology of slates, siltstone and sandstones of the Devonian period** (Morte Slate Formation and Ilfracombe Slate Formation) with narrow **seams of limestone** also occurring.
- **Broadleaved woodland and coniferous plantations** occur on the hills, spilling over and clothing the sides of the combes.
- The agricultural landscape is given over to a **mix of pasture and arable cropping** (the combes predominantly under pasture) bounded by **native hedgerows**.
- **A series of narrow lanes**, often sunken, **dipping in and out of the combes and over the hills** – connecting the dispersed hamlets and villages.
- **Small to medium field units** (the combes retaining an older, smaller field pattern of medieval and earlier enclosures).
- **Red sandstone villages, hamlets and scattered farms** typically occur within the **shelter of the combes**.
- **Country house estates and historic parkland** impart a strong sense of designed landscape character.
- **Prominent triple line of pylons** running northeast to southwest and an awareness in views of the proximity of the urban centres of Bridgwater and Taunton.
- **Extensive views both inland and to the coast**.

# Rolling Farmland and Settled Combes



## 9. Rolling Farmland and Settled Combes

*One of the most satisfying scenes in the Quantocks is that dominated by the road running from the top of Buncombe Hill to Broomfield. All around rolls the switchback of combe and field and red arable with hillsides climbing to the skyline. Far below, reaching back to the bright line of sea, spreads that jigsaw landscape, in spring brilliantly coloured; squares of red and terracotta interspersed by lozenges of green grassland, by the irregular yellow-green splashes of budding woods and blackish-green blobs of conifer plantations.*

*Berta Lawrence, Quantock Country (1952)*

### Location and boundaries

- 9.1 This is the landscape type covering the largest extent within the QLPS area. With the exception of one small outlying area (on the west side of the heathland landscape) the **Rolling Farmland and Settled Combes** landscape type is represented in the Quantock Hills by one continuous area that extends in the south from the edge of Toulton, encompassing Kingston St Mary and skirting around West Monkton and on to Thurloxton and as far as Kings Cliff Quarry in the east before continuing northwards to include the villages of Goathurst, Enmore, and Spaxton. The original Landscape Character Assessment of the Quantock Hills (Land Use Consultants 1997) separated the Rolling Hills from the Enclosed Combes but these landscapes are so entwined – by the repeated patterns of their landform – that in this assessment it is considered they should be viewed as one type of landscape. The interconnectedness of the hills and combes is perhaps best illustrated in north-easterly views across the landscape from Birches Corner or indeed in the view as described by Lawrence above.
- 9.2 This is a landscape type that transcends the designated AONB boundary, continuing its repeating pattern of deep combes and exaggerated rounded terrain, gradually giving way to more subtle slopes and undulations of the Quantock Foothills. The AONB designation stops short of the landscape in and around Hestercombe House and Gardens where there could be no truer sense of being in the Quantocks – the deep cut combes, large country house at the base of the slope, woodland and designed pleasure grounds – a recurring landscape scene so familiar as to be considered quintessentially Quantock in character. This abrupt approach to the boundary is also evident in the wooded valley of Kings Cliff where the AONB terminates across the middle of the valley yet the character of the valley clearly continues eastwards to the edge of North Petherton.

## Description

- 9.3 The younger, softer rocks of the slates, sandstone, siltstones and mudstone underlying this landscape have been eroded to form the combes that drain eastwards (forming part of the River Parrett catchment system) and southwards (forming part of the River Tone Catchment system). The combes are typically tight with steep valley sides and are often wooded particularly on the steeper upper valley sides that have retained remnants of ancient ash woodland such as is found at Aisholt. Native moisture loving trees occur streamside and in the bottom of the combes and, combined with hedgerow trees and surviving orchards, the impression is one of a well-treed landscape throughout.
- 9.4 The combes are characterised predominantly by hedged pastures created by medieval and earlier enclosures. Sunken lanes and hedgebanks (some stone faced such as around Aisholt) create a sense of enclosure in the combes and this is further exaggerated in places where the tree canopies meet to create a tunnel over the road. The intact pattern of small irregular fields is of considerable historic interest representing, in some cases, Iron Age landscape patterns or phases of Saxon and Medieval expression<sup>38</sup>.



Figure 9.1 Ornate stone-faced banks within the combe at Aisholt.

- 9.5 On ascent, the combes merge seamlessly with the series of soft rounded hills and long, low ridges that create a complex, organic landform of rolling hills. Whilst the previous landscape assessment described the rolling hills as predominantly having fields of permanent pasture, it is clear that the last 20 years has seen an increase in arable production; improvements in mechanisation allowing the fertile soils to be exploited for cropping. Pasture is still predominant but conversion to arable continues apace - ploughed red soils and a variety of crops creating a landscape of different textures and colour. This is particularly true of some of the more open ridges and, where this landscape meets within the markedly arable plateaux to the north and south of Broomfield. Horse keeping and horsiculture is a marked land use – stabling, ménages and racing gallops (at Enmore) occurring throughout.

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<sup>38</sup> The Landscape of the Quantock Hills AONB (Countryside Agency, 2003)

- 9.6 The underlying geology for the southern half of this character area is the Morte Slates Formation (thick sequence of silvery green thickly cleaved slates interbedded with occasional fine-grained sandstones). Use of this stone is no better illustrated than in the 18<sup>th</sup> century designed arcadian landscape at Hestercombe (and in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century formal gardens by Lutyens and Jekyll). The northern half of this area is underlain by the Ilfracombe Slates Formation through which run thin seams of Devonian limestone; reflected in the presence of limekilns in the landscape such as at Hawkridge and Aisholt.
- 9.7 Some areas of woodland on higher ground have been converted to coniferous plantation woodland and are marked features that stand out in this intimate landscape – Muchcare, Hawkridge Wood and the Great Wood for example (the latter not to be confused with the much larger plantation forest of the same name). At Kings Cliff the woodland comprises of more than 80% broadleaf species consisting of old remnant oak, sweet chestnut planted and coppiced with standards since the 1930's, together with more recent plantings of beech and Corsican pine in the 1950's<sup>39</sup>.



Figure 9.2 Limekiln at Aisholt (left) and morte slate walls in the surrounding farmland at Hestercombe (right) - both in a poor state of repair.

- 9.8 Buncombe, running north of Kingston St Mary, is notably larger and more open than most of the combes and here, the transition from valley sides to farmed hills is subtle. Buncombe is a main route through the hills as people cut across the Quantocks between the towns of Bridgwater and Taunton. Around Broomfield the combes extend as far as the *Arable Plateaux* landscape and here, the influence of arable farming, spilling over into the tops of the combes, is clearly discernible. The introduction of game crops, on the sides on the open slopes of Buncombe, although limited in extent, creates strong geometric lines in a landscape of inherently organic form.
- 9.9 The shelter afforded by the combes, easy access and historic utilisation of the water source has meant a long history of settlement - with houses and farms, sometimes small villages, located in the shelter of the steep combe sides – Aisholt, Merridge,

<sup>39</sup> Quantock Forest Plan 2016-2026 Forestry Commission via [https://www.forestryengland.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Quantocks%20Forest%20Plan%202016-2026%20Part%202\\_0.pdf](https://www.forestryengland.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Quantocks%20Forest%20Plan%202016-2026%20Part%202_0.pdf)

Coombe, West Monkton and Kingston St Mary for example. Broomfield is the only village that sits up on the top of the hills – on a small ridge between two valley systems - the most northern of these valleys being the home of the National Trust owned property of Fyne Court – previously a large country estate with pleasure grounds developed around the natural watercourses and enclosed landform of the valley. Having been managed for wildlife for decades, the designed landscape at Fyne Court is now difficult to read and were it not for surviving features such as the folly and the boathouse, the sense of the designed landscape would be imperceptible to many. Villages are typically characterised by warm red sandstone, painted stone and render. Stone walls common are common markers to village entrances and property boundaries. Both slate and clay tiled roofs are found throughout. The village of Aisholt is characterised by the repeated use of pink paint or limewash and by a number of thatched cottages. A repeating theme in the southeast of the area is village crossroads around small triangular greens, such as at West Monkton.

- 9.10 Aside from a small outlier west of Great Wood, this landscape is one continuous sweep and there is great diversity in terms of relationship with surrounding landscapes. In the north around Dodington to Nether Stowey and on through Plainsfield to Aisholt, the hills and combes sit directly below forested and heathland hills with views greatly influenced by this upland landscape. Further to the east and south from Enmore round to Kingston St Mary, there is sufficient geographical detachment from the upland area and a greater sense of connection with the lower lying foothills and beyond into the vale landscape surrounding Taunton and Bridgwater.
- 9.11 Native mixed-species hedgerows, comprising a mix of hawthorn, blackthorn, oak and ash, typically bound the fields. The intact pattern of small irregular fields is considerable historic interest representing, in some cases, Iron Age landscape patterns or phases of Saxon and Medieval expansion<sup>40</sup>. Between the heathland landscape of Lydeard Hill and the forested landscape of Wind Down, there is a contrast in pattern in the landscape where a number of field boundaries are characterised by stone faced beech hedge banks (of the much later Parliamentary Enclosures Act). These have now overgrown to form large beech trees – their impressive canopy, knotted and gnarled root systems making for impressive sculptural features in the landscape. Many of the mature beech have reached the end of their lives and have either fallen or are being cut down through proactive management.
- 9.12 HawkrIDGE Reservoir is situated between Spaxton and Aisholt. It is a County Wildlife Site, and provides a valuable habitat for insects, amphibians and wildfowl<sup>41</sup>. The reservoir is popular with anglers as it contains a variety of Trout. HawkrIDGE

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<sup>40</sup> The Countryside Agency (2003) *The Quantock Hills Landscape – An assessment of the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty*

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.wessexwater.co.uk/About-us/Community/Visiting-our-reservoirs/HawkrIDGE-reservoir/>

Reservoir sits outside of the designated landscape yet is unmistakably part of the combes. Not far from Hawkridge the growing and stripping of turf is apparent in views – forming a bright green hue and red stripes against the more muted tones of the hills.



Figure 9.3 Fishing on Hawkridge Reservoir (left) and turf stripping near Aisholt (right).

- 9.13 The **Rolling Farmland and Settled Combes** landscape is crossed by a number of narrow, winding lanes dipping in and out of the combes and up over the hills. The lanes are often sunken and bounded by hedgerows and connect to the scattered farmsteads that are dispersed across the landscape. The lanes are regularly used as a cut through across the hills to avoid congested roads in Bridgwater and Taunton and as a means of accessing the hill top areas for recreation.
- 9.14 Much of this landscape type is characterised by large Country Houses and estates. The houses, with their estate cottages and gatehouses or lodges and surrounding designed parkland combine to create a notable sense of grand design e.g. Tetton House, Quantock Lodge, Hestercombe House and Halswell House. Divided land ownership of a number of these properties has seen inconsistent and insensitive management, leading to a loss of the historic fabric that is so important to understanding the history of this part of the Quantock landscape.



Figure 9.4 The Temple of Harmony (left) – part of the designed landscape at Halswell House in Goathurst shown here (right) with its designed parkland landscape in separate ownership and under intensive arable cultivation.

9.15 Writing in 1952, of the trees being felled at Halswell House in Goathurst, Berta Lawrence wrote:

*For hundreds of years this park has been renowned for the wealth and beauty of its timber. Collinson and Arthur Young both wrote of it in the eighteenth century, admiring the massive chestnut trees measuring fifteen feet in circumference, the groves of oak where sheltered the little temple of Robin Hood and the Temple of Love<sup>42</sup>. Will these disappear like the splendid trees? I have met many people deeply regretful at the destruction of this beautiful park ... (but) I cannot honestly say I have ever heard the local inhabitants express any objection or dismay.*

9.16 Views are a key part of the perceptual character of the landscape with hilltops and ridges providing extensive vistas – across the lower lying landscapes towards the Severn Estuary (including the prominent towers of Hinkley Point Nuclear Power Station and the ongoing construction works for the Hinkley Point C reactor) and inland to the Vale of Taunton Deane.



Figure 9.5 Views across the rolling landform (left) to the Agricultural Foothills and on to Bridgwater (right).

Nature Conservation Designations	
Ancient Woodland (Total area)	160.39ha
LNR	Gadds Valley 3.69 (11.68ha)
SAC	Exmoor & Quantocks (54.36ha)
SSSI	The Quantocks (158.70ha)

<sup>42</sup> Known today as the Temple of Harmony.

Historic Environment Designations	
Listed Buildings	Grade I (4)
	Grade II* (14)
	Grade II (63)
Registered Park and Gardens	Halswell Park (Grade II)
	Hestercombe (Grade I)
Scheduled Monuments	7

## Evaluation

- 9.17 This is a landscape of **strong** character – the repeating pattern of steep, enclosed combes with picturesque red sandstone villages opening out to dramatic rounded hills and ridges make for quintessential Quantock countryside. The management of the landscape has resulted in a loss of landscape pattern (particularly smaller hedged pasture converted to larger field under arable cropping) and the spill of arable production into the upper slopes of the combes is apparent.
- 9.18 The condition of the landscape is variable but overall is considered to be **moderate** – the valleys are judged to be in a better condition; their natural physical form seemingly allowing them to largely escape issues such as agricultural intensification which has led to a weakening of the landscape pattern.

## Issues and Opportunities

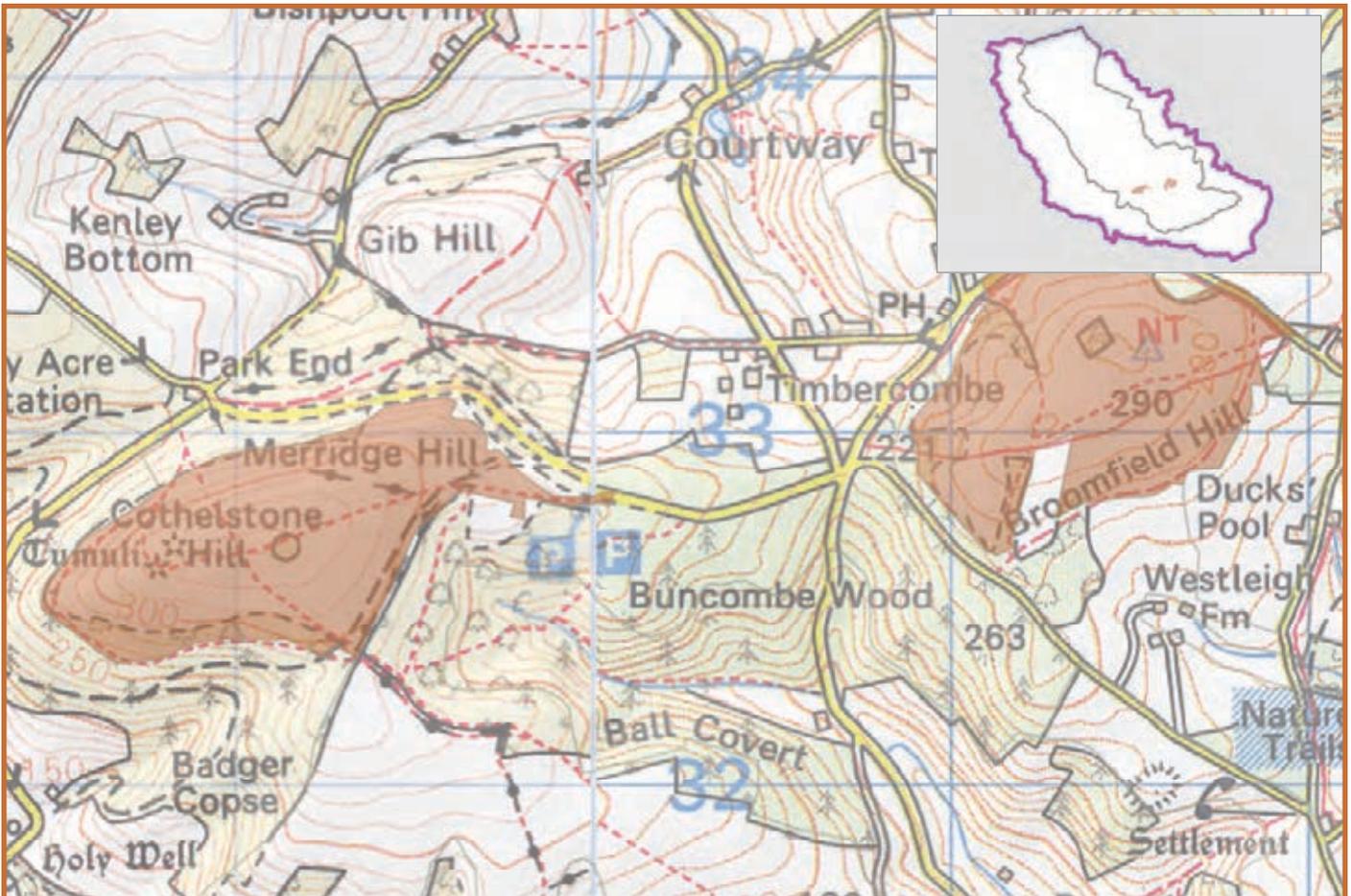
- Increasing traffic pressures (affecting tranquillity and pace) and insensitive treatment of highways e.g. kerbing, road markings and widening rural lanes detract from the rural character of the landscape.
- Traffic pressures on rural lanes – causing damage to hedgerows and verges and creating informal passing bays that are often an eye sore. Opportunities to engage with Local Planning Authority and Somerset Highways to develop measures for sensitive highways treatments to be implemented
- Weakening of the field pattern - historic removal of hedgerow, poor management and excessive flailing of the surviving hedgerow network.
- Vulnerable to potential future proposals for tall structures in the landscape such as turbines and communication masts.
- Pressures to convert traditional agricultural buildings in the landscape with schemes often not sympathetic to the agricultural history and character of the building or the wider

through policy and guidance.

- Insensitive development change within the landscape – where inappropriate design and materials are not responding to local vernacular or landscape context. Seek opportunities to fund building guidance to help work toward development that is better than ‘just good enough to approve’ within the protected landscape.
  - Localised decline of beech hedgebanks and loss of mature trees (such as at Birches Corner). Opportunities to explore grant funding to implement management approach to ensure the trees are varied in age and size.
  - Loss of orchards across the landscape.
  - Decline of features such as stone-faced hedgebanks at Aisholt and around Hestercombe.
  - Visually vulnerable landscape – highly sensitive for example to poorly sited development (of any kind) or to insensitively designed coniferous plantation.
  - Turf stripping around Merridge creating bright green stripes across the rolling landform and the stripping away of soil from the Hills.
- landscape.
- Potential for future renewable energy schemes in addition to existing e.g. in-field solar energy scheme near Kingston St Mary.
  - Opportunities to conserve, enhance and restore the historic designed landscapes e.g. through unified management approach or grant funding such as Countryside Stewardship.
  - Views to the urban areas of Bridgwater and Taunton and to Hinkley Point power station on the coast.
  - Declining condition of cast iron heritage signposts.
  - Visual jarring of coniferous plantation against the broadleaf woodland.
  - Ash die back is likely to have a significant impact on some ash-dominated woodlands with the probable loss of a large proportion of the mature trees over the next decade.
  - Combination of greater rainfall intensity and an increase in arable cultivation on higher ground has increased the amount of surface water runoff and soil down the slopes, causing flooding.

## **Landscape Vision and Future Management**

The vision is for a viable agricultural landscape that enhances the special qualities of its farmed history – supporting the restoration and conservation of special features that truly define the landscape pattern, such as hedgerows, stone-face banks, beech hedgebanks and sunken lanes. There is a need to ensure the quality of views (both internally and beyond this landscape) is not threatened by inappropriate development in the lower lying vales and on the coast. Settlement within the landscape should remain sparse and dispersed with any new development responding to the sensitivities of the landform; respecting historic settlement pattern and local vernacular.



## Key Characteristics

- Pronounced and clearly defined **rounded open hill landscape** occurring between **260m and 332m AOD**.
- Land cover of **unimproved grassland with areas of bracken, dense scrub and some areas of heather**.
- Underlain by sedimentary **slates, siltstones and sandstones of the Devonian period** giving rise to shallow acidic soils and exposed rock in places.
- **Expansive views** (some panoramic) – encompassing **varied inland and coastal scenery**, stretching as far as Wales.
- **Ringed successively by scrub, broadleaved woodland and farmland** at the base of the hills – the woodland restricting views out from the lower slopes.
- Significant areas of **open access land**, much used by the general public for recreation.
- Rich **archaeological resource**.



# 10. Open Hills

## Location and boundaries

- 10.1 There are two Character Areas (Cothelstone Hill and Broomfield Hill) of the **Open Hills** landscape type. Although occurring relatively close to each other, these are distinct and geographically separate hills occurring within the southern end of, and wholly within, the AONB.
- 10.2 Key Characteristics of the Landscape Character Type are outlined below followed by a separate description for each of the two Character Areas.

## Description

### *Landscape Type Summary*

- 10.3 Separate and distinct from the *Heathland Hills and Combes* landscape type, the **Open Hills** landscape type is a rounded hilltop, rich in archaeological interest and predominantly defined by a ground cover of unimproved grassland, interspersed with some areas of heather, bracken and low level scrub and surrounded by developing and more mature broadleaved woodland. Views are extensive and varied across surrounding lower-lying landscapes – incorporating both inland and coastal scenery. This is a landscape with a strong sense of exposure to the elements but it is not remote, being a focus for recreation and offering views of obvious human activity in the landscape.

## Character Areas

### Cothelstone Hill

- 10.4 One of the most visited sites within the Quantock Hills, Cothelstone Hill sits between the *Wooded and Farmed Escarpment* landscape (that rises above and forms part of the Cothelstone Estate) and the *Rolling Farmland with Settled Combes*. It stands alone as a distinct rounded hill.
- 10.5 Cothelstone Hill is a small character area – a hilltop summit occurring between 270m and 332m AOD. Cothelstone Hill, along with Broomfield Hill, is isolated from the expansive *Heathland Hills and Combes* landscape and although sharing many similar physical characteristics, does not have the same perceptual qualities – being smaller and more contained, notably less remote and not of the same strong heathland character. It is underlain by a geology of Leighland Slates Formation – the stone often exposed at the surface due to shallow soils. This sedimentary bedrock was formed 387.7 and 372.2 million years ago in the Devonian period<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> <http://mapapps.bgs.ac.uk/geologyofbritain3d/index.html?>

- 10.6 This area of open access land, occurring above the *Wooded and Farmed Escarpment*, is managed by the Quantock Hills AONB Service on behalf of South West Heritage Trust. Cothelstone Hill is a much used and valued public resource. Its open access status, as well as a number of public footpaths and bridleways, makes this a popular area for walkers, dog walkers and horse riders.
- 10.7 The hill has an open, rounded character with a simple land cover – unimproved grassland with areas of bracken cover and some ground-covering scrub. There is a scattering of trees on the open hill - typically hawthorn and some small oaks. Developing scrub and broadleaved woodland have established on the lower slopes and this reduces the sense of openness of the hills and limits views to the other hilltop landscapes. In spring, large areas of Cothelstone Hill are carpeted with bluebells.
- 10.8 One of the main characteristics of this landscape is the extensive, panoramic views. To the south and west there are views across the Vale of Taunton Deane to the Blackdown Hills AONB, to the Brendon Hills and wider landscape of southeast Exmoor as well as to the coast at Minehead. Looking north, there are long vistas across the rolling farmland, combes and agricultural fringe to the lower hills that extend to Bridgwater and out to the Bristol Channel (with the islands of Steep Holm and Flat Holm clearly in view) and across to Wales and also north to the Mendip Hills. The geometric, block structures of the reactors at Hinkley Point nuclear power station are prominent features within views as are the on-going construction works for the new reactor; affecting night views (through a significant increase in light pollution) as well as day time views.



Figure 10.1 Views across the Rolling Farmland and Settled Combes to the River Parrett and coast (left) and views across the Wooded and Farmed Escarpment, the Vale of Taunton Deane and Doniford Valley to the coast at Minehead with the hills of Exmoor as a backdrop (right).

- 10.9 The popularity of Cothelstone Hill has led to the provision of small-scale infrastructure at the entrance to the hill to facilitate visitors. They include a car park, interpretation board, picnic tables, benches, a dog waste bin, information/signage and fencing – evoking a more of a ‘country park’ character than elsewhere in the AONB.

10.10 At the highest point of the hill stand a few beech trees, contained within a partially banked circular platform. The trees are affectionately referred to as The Seven Sisters. Many have been lost over the years with only three of the original clump remaining. A younger replacement clump (planted in the 1970s) has been gradually felled as a result of damage to a medieval rabbit warren. A new clump has been planted. The surviving Seven Sisters trees create a strong landmark and can be picked out from considerable distance – distinguishing Cothelstone Hill over a wide area. In the shade of the trees, the small herd of Exmoor ponies grazing the hill are often found. These ponies graze the hill all year round – helping to manage the levels of scrub encroachment.



Figure 10.2 Herd of Exmoors grazing the open hill (left) and the strewn foundations of a folly positioned on top of a bowl barrow (right).

10.11 A bowl barrow<sup>44</sup> is located on the highest point of Cothelstone Hill and is surmounted by foundations of a ruined 18<sup>th</sup> century folly. The barrow mound is 1.5m high, and 12m in diameter. The folly (circular tower) was destroyed in 1910, having been built for Lady Hillsborough, the estate owner, between 1768 and 1780 for the purpose of viewing the surrounding country.<sup>45</sup>

### **Broomfield Hill**

10.12 Broomfield Hill is located just a short distance from Cothelstone Hill and comprises two interconnected areas. The larger area to the north (with a smaller field extending south) is owned by the National Trust. Previously given over to arable cropping, this northern part of the hill is now a herb-rich neutral to acid grassland managed through grazing and some rotational coppicing of gorse patches – keeping it open in character and exposed. There are very clear views to the north – across the *Rolling Farmland and Settled Combes* landscape and beyond the AONB boundary to the lower lying farmland where the River Parrett winds its course through the landscape to the Bristol Channel. The nuclear power station at Hinkley Point is prominent on the coastline. Views to the *Forested Hills and Combes* and

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<sup>44</sup> Bowl barrows, the most numerous form of round barrow, are funerary monuments dating from the Late Neolithic period to the Late Bronze Age, with most examples belonging to the period 2400-1500 BC. They were constructed as earthen or rubble mounds, sometimes ditched, which covered single or multiple burials. They occur either in isolation or grouped as cemeteries and often acted as a focus for burials in later periods. <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1015086> as viewed on 22/01/2019

<sup>45</sup> <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1015086> as viewed on 22/01/2019

the southern reaches of the *Heathland Hills and Coombes* are also clear. There is a trig point at 290m AOD and a water tower is positioned at the same height but is discreet – screened by trees and scrub.

- 10.13 The southern area is known as ‘Broomfield Hill Common’ and has no known owner – limiting the opportunity for active management. Although the same landscape type as Cothelstone Hill, the lack of active management and no grazing programme means that bracken, scrub and young woodland has more of an influence on the open hilltop – particularly in the west. There is a more varied land cover creating a less open character, with views out being more restricted. Much of this open hilltop is a sea of blue in the spring with vast swathes of bluebells. As with Cothelstone Hill, the lower reaches of the slopes are well wooded.
- 10.14 Broomfield Hill is popular with dog walkers but whilst there is a recreational focus it is less well known and is more unassuming in its character compared with Cothelstone Hill - with no car parking provision, interpretation boards or other facilities.
- 10.15 Broomfield Hill is underlain by Morte Slates Formation of the Devonian Period (slates interbedded with siltstone and sandstone) – sedimentary bedrock formed between 382.7 and 358.9 million years ago<sup>46</sup>.

<b>Nature Conservation Designations</b>	
Ancient Woodland Total area	4.54ha
<b>Historic Environment Designations</b>	
Scheduled Monuments	4

## Evaluation

- 10.16 Both Cothelstone Hill and Broomfield Hill have a **strong** landscape character – the rounded open hill tops, the strong sense of elevation and exposure to the elements, the varied and breathtaking views all combine to create a distinctive landscape character overall.
- 10.17 The visible **condition** of both character areas is judged to be **moderate to good**.

<sup>46</sup> <http://mapapps.bgs.ac.uk/geologyofbritain3d/index.html?>

## Issues and Opportunities

### Cothelstone Hill

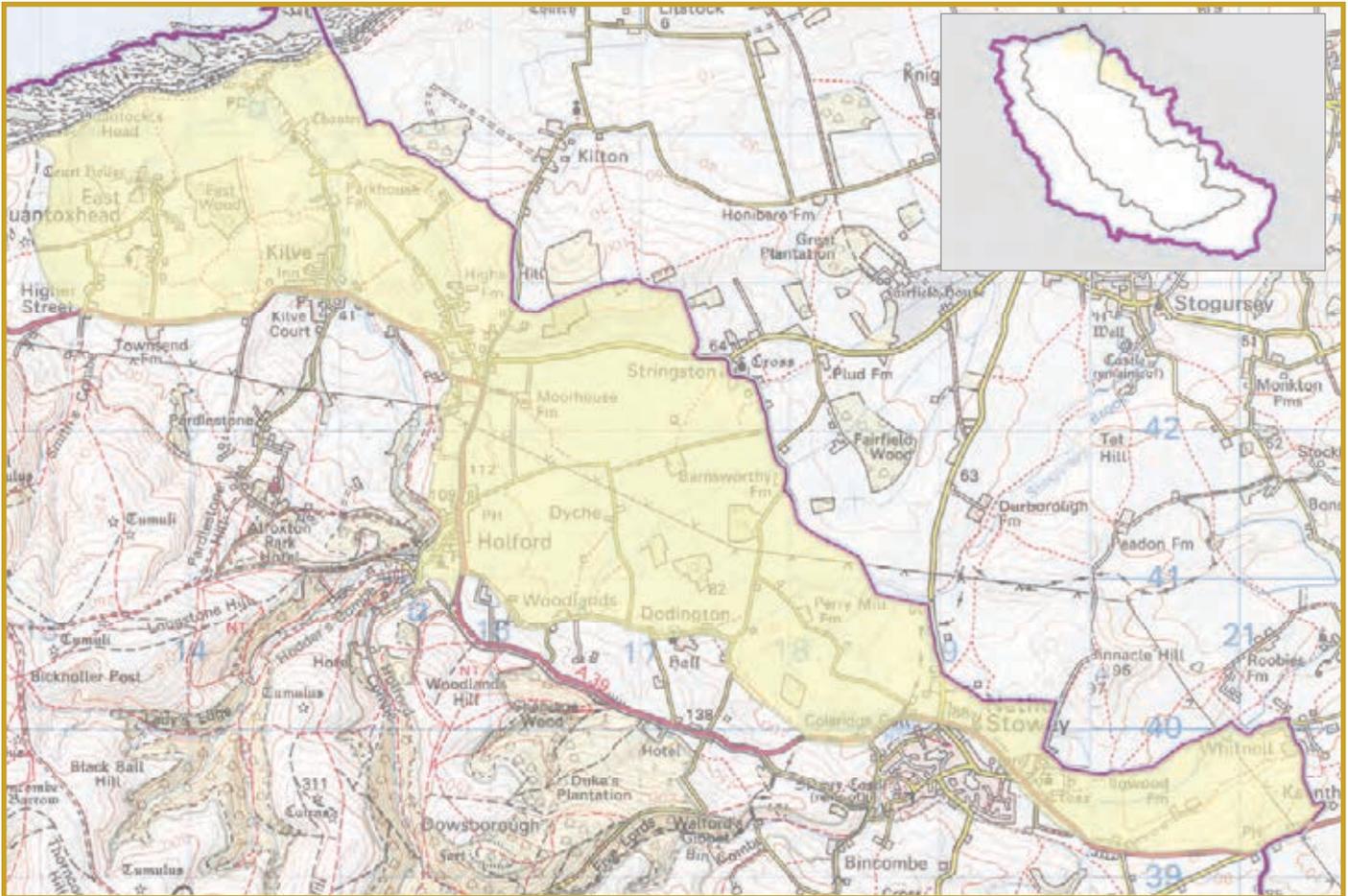
- Denuded physical condition of the landscape due to higher levels of recreational pressure e.g. footfall, horses and cycling eroding the soil and carving paths and tracks across the hills.
- Some visual impacts due to provision of facilities to meet demands of recreational use e.g. car parking, signage, bins, picnic tables, posts – adding clutter to the landscape and imparting a country park character. Opportunities to reconsider presentation to ensure sensitivity to landscape character whilst retaining facilities that are reassuring to users who might otherwise not visit the Quantocks.
- Only a few surviving trees in the original Seven Sisters beech clump which is a distinctive landscape feature. A replacement clump has been planted (to protect the medieval rabbit warren under the previous replacement clump).
- Pressure on archaeological features due to recreation and the balance of protecting heritage assets from damage without cluttering the hilltop e.g. with fencing.
- Colonisation and encroachment of scrub particularly on the lower slopes (due to under grazing), enclosing some views and reducing the sense of openness on the hills.
- The prominence of Hinkley Point nuclear power station and the effect on visual amenity during the day and at night (the latter due to significant increase in light emission at the Hinkley C construction site).
- Dog fouling and other antisocial behaviour including small fires from barbeques, burnt out vehicles, fly tipping and illegal off road vehicle use.
- Balancing the desire to keep the open character of the hilltops whilst not compromising wildlife value e.g. through loss of scrub for ground nesting birds.
- Threats to high visual amenity of the landscape through potentially significant development and/or land use change in wider agricultural landscape.
- Reduction in the size of the aging Exmoor pony herd potentially leading to increased colonisation of scrub. Opportunity to ensure a new herd of suitable size is brought onto Cothelstone Hill.

### *Broomfield Hill*

- Damage to roadside verges in adjacent *Rolling Farmland with Settled Combes* and the creation of informal parking areas at the edge of the Open Hills.
- Balancing the desire to keep the open character of the hilltops whilst not compromising wildlife value e.g. through loss of scrub for ground nesting birds.
- Lack of any legal mechanism to permit active management of Broomfield Hills Common, leading to increasing scrub and bracken encroachment.
- The prominence of Hinkley Point nuclear power station and the effect on visual amenity during the day and at night (the latter due to significant increase in light emission at the Hinkley C construction site).
- Threats to high visual amenity of the landscape through potentially significant development and/or land use change in wider agricultural landscape.

### **Landscape Vision and Future Management**

The landscape character vision for the **Open Hills** is that the simple, open and exposed nature of the hilltops be the overriding character into the future - offering an accessible physically exhilarating environment amongst the surrounding enclosed farmland, with high quality and varied views across the wider Quantock Hills, both inland and to the coast. The hills will continue to be a focus for recreation whilst ensuring activity does not compromise archaeological resource, wildlife value and visual amenity (through facility provision and clutter). Ecologically rich woodland will continue to surround the hills.



## Key Characteristics

- Sitting immediately beyond the 'Agricultural Fringe to Coast' and 'Agricultural Foothills', **this is a lower-lying farmed landscape, extending down to the cliffs** of the Jurassic Coast.
- Visually interesting and **varied landform comprising undulating terrain, rounded hilltops and areas of flat land.**
- **Elevation varies from 15m AOD** at the top of the low coastal cliffs, **reaching as high as 120m** at the base of the Agricultural Foothills.
- Predominantly underlain by a **surface geology of mudstone, siltstone, limestone and sandstone (Blue Lias Formation and Charmouth Mudstone Formation)** repeatedly seen in buildings and structures.
- An overtly rural landscape defined by a **land use of arable cultivation and pasture** with fields still bound by elm hedges close to the coast.
- **Varied views – inland to the dramatic heathland hills as well as out to sea;** taking in views of the Welsh coastline and beyond.
- Kilve and East Quantoxhead are **picturesque villages** with a **timeless appeal.**
- Strong sense of **exposure to the elements** at the top of the cliffs.
- **Views of Hinkley Point power station** create a jarring interface between rural and industrial land uses.
- **Broadleaved woodland blocks and small copses** combine a **well-treed landscape in places** albeit with a **death of hedgerow trees** across many parts of the landscape.
- **Tenanted farmsteads and cottages** belonging to the Fairfield Estate and to the East Quantoxhead estate **create a consistent vernacular.**

# Lowland Hills to Coast



# 11. Lowland Hills to Coast

*Between Nether Stowey and Kilve the landscape broadens greatly, unhemmed by villages and sweeping eastwards to a wider horizon. Cornfields and emerald grasslands roll and plunge towards a sea faintly coloured like the inside of a grey shell.*

*Berta Lawrence (1952) 'Quantock Country'*

## Location and boundaries

- 11.1 Within the QLPS area this **Lowland Hills to Coast** landscape character type initially follows the AONB boundary as it extends east from the Jurassic Coast. Just east of Higher Hill farm it extends southwards to Holford and eastwards to the edge of Stringston, dropping to the edge of Nether Stowey and eastwards to Keenthorne. The QLPS area boundary is defined largely by landform and how this affects the perceptual relationship with the hill and ridge landscape of the Quantocks. Pinnacle Hill and the Hill south of Kilton mark the point of transition where there is a stronger perceptual relationship northwards to the coast and, at the same time, the Quantock Hills begins to become a feature in the distance as opposed to a 'part' of the landscape.
- 11.2 This landscape character type extends further east – well beyond the QLPS area boundary; forming part of a much larger area of lowland hills that eventually merges inland with the Somerset Levels and Moors and with the Coast close to Hinkley Point.

## Description

- 11.3 The part of the **Lowland Hills to Coast**, falling within the QLPS area, is somewhat transitional in character – bearing some characteristics of the higher *Agricultural Foothills to Coast* landscape (with which its boundary is contiguous) yet taking on its own character as the land begins to fall away to a lower level as it merges with the coast and is influenced by the surrounding lowlands.
- 11.4 This is a landscape with a striking variety of surrounding landscape scene. On one hand there is an immediate and strong sense of connection in views to the inland *Heathland Hills and Combes* and the *Enclosed Wooded Combes* landscapes and, on the other, a connection in views to the coastal landscape of Bridgwater Bay and across to Wales.
- 11.5 The **Lowland Hills to Coast** landscape has a complex topography with notable rounded hilltops giving way to undulating and flat terrain. This variation in landform is reflected in place names; lanes and farms for example being pre-fixed with

'higher' and 'lower'. To the east and West of Kilve the landform is clearly rounded and hilly – reaching heights of 90m AOD at Hilltop Lane yet falling sharply away to the south of Kilve and around Holford where the land becomes very open and only gently sloping - having the appearance of being flat. Here, arable cultivation is the dominant land use – providing a more open landscape and allowing views across to the nuclear power station at Hinkley Point.



Figure 11.1 Views across to Hinkley Point on the Coast

- 11.6 As the **Lowland Hills to Coast** shares characteristics in common with the adjacent foothills, the boundary between the two landscapes is less visually tangible than other character boundaries within the AONB. The A39 provides a sensible southern boundary where a break in the slope broadly coincides with a transition from the Triassic mudstone of the *Agricultural Foothills* to the Triassic and Jurassic mudstone and lias of these lowland hills. The change in underlying geology is apparent above ground – the familiarity of red sandstone buildings giving way to the grey and weathered-yellow of the Lias. Building materials are more mixed than in other parts of the AONB – lias and sandstone, render, thatch and slate and clay tiles occurring all together. Mixed stone is seen for example in boundary walls, dwellings and agricultural buildings (along with feature ammonite fossils) at East Quantoxhead.
- 11.7 The key settlements within this landscape are linear villages strewn out along the roads – Kilve, East Quantoxhead, Holford and Strington are the small centres of population with a regular scattering of farmsteads making up the majority of other built form. Holford sits further inland than the other two villages and is split across two landscapes – the lower lying dwellings falling within this landscape type whilst those extending up into Holford and Hodders Combe sit within the *Enclosed Wooded Combes* landscape type.
- 11.8 The Medieval settlements of Kilve and East Quantoxhead are the settlements closest to the coast. Kilve is focussed on the A39 with the village also extending north along Sea Lane towards the Bristol Channel. The impressive 18th century country house of Kilve Court lies to the south of the A39. East Quantoxhead comprises houses and farms along Frog Street and Higher Street – the two lanes converging at the Court House where there are rows of picturesque cottages. This

imposing Grade I listed manor house occupies a prominent position on the edge of series of small hills that fall away to the flatter land extending out to the coast. The Court House, the village duck pond, the small church of St Mary's and the row of thatched cottages make for a very pleasing rural scene and there is a sense of a landscape with a slow pace of change – a rural backwater that has a timeless quality. This is also true of the landscape surrounding St Mary's church and the remains of the early 14th Century Chantry<sup>47</sup> at Kilve (Scheduled Monument) where there is a similar understated, quaint charm to the place.

- 11.9 East Quantoxhead and Kilve Pill are linked by a circular public right of way, which along some of its length follows the top edge of the low cliffs. Here views along the rugged Jurassic Coast are dramatic and the sense of exposure to the elements is strong. The South Wales coastline and to the Mendip Hills are easily identifiable. An old lime kiln ruin on the coast at East Quantoxhead is a clue to the lime burning industry common to the Quantocks Hills – its position here on the coast due limestone having historically been shipped across the channel from Wales.
- 11.10 The brick and cast iron structure of the oil retort at Kilve Pill is a curiosity in the landscape and dates back to the 1920s when it was discovered that the shale beds of the North Somerset Coast were rich in oil. The retort was erected to convert shale to oil. This venture did not succeed but the structure survives as a visual link to this interesting point in Quantock history.
- 11.11 Formal parking provision, toilets and tearooms at Kilve and a car park at East Quantoxhead reflect the appeal of the area to visitors. Kilve is the busier of the two - the low cliffs dropping away to create a gentle descent to the beach which is popular for rock pooling and fossil hunting (see *Jurassic Coast*).



Figure 11.2 Visitors and visitor facilities at Kilve (left and right).

- 11.12 This agricultural landscape is a mix of arable and pasture with arable production more widespread and field sizes accommodating crops becoming noticeably larger on the flatter land towards the coast. Fields are enclosed – bounded by mixed

<sup>47</sup> The monument includes a chantry chapel and part of a manor house ([historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1002960](http://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1002960))

native species hedgerows with elm occurring close to the coast and blackthorn hedgerows occurring near the cliff tops. This landscape type as a whole (if you consider it stretching beyond the QLPS area boundary) is characterised by numerous woodland blocks and copses – as seen for example between the AONB boundary and the villages of Stogursey and Burton. A significant broadleaved ancient woodland (East Wood) occurs to the east of East Quantoxhead whilst smaller copses and swathes occur around the Court House and to the east of Sea Lane (Kilve) respectively. Although not making up a large proportion of the landscape, the repeated pattern of woodland combined with hedgerows (often not laid or cut) creates an impression of a well-treed landscape in places. In other areas by way of contrast, the hedges are very short flailed (or have been removed) and there is notable absence of hedgerow trees; creating a far more open scene with few points of interest.

- 11.13 The A39 is the only main road in this landscape – it is a busy route between the M5, Bridgwater and seaside town of Minehead and on to Exmoor and the North Devon coast. In close proximity its influence both aurally and visually is felt. Just off the A39, development of a wedding venue along with access road, farm shop, business units, café and static caravans for Hinkley C employees has created a relatively large centre of development (clearly visible from higher ground). Large incongruous agricultural buildings are scattered throughout the landscape and are often detracting features.



*Figure 11.3 Intensive arable production resulting in loss of hedgerow boundaries (left). Development north of the A39 (wedding venue, business hub, new access and static caravan provision for Hinkley C employees) is collectively bringing change to rural views (right)*

- 11.14 There is a strong sense that this is a very different part of the QLPS area – it is perhaps the notable variation in building materials and the dramatic change from the muted greens, reds and purples of the inland scenery to the lush greens and browns of the farmland and the greys and blues of the coast that sets this landscape apart.

<b>Nature Conservation Designations</b>	
Ancient Woodland (Total area)	27.73ha
SAC	Exmoor & Quantock Oakwoods (0.06ha)
SSSI	Blue Anchor to Lilstock Coast (2.76ha)
	The Quantocks (0.06ha)
<b>Historic Environment Designations</b>	
Listed Buildings	Grade I (1)
	Grade II* (9)
	Grade II (31)
Scheduled Monuments	36

## Evaluation

- 11.15 This is a landscape of **moderate** character - higher hills giving way to undulating lower lying land that falls away to meet the dramatically exposed coastline. With the exception of the busy A39 cutting its route through the countryside, this is an overtly rural place with a strong connection to both the inland and coastal landscapes. The villages of Kilve and East Quantoxhead evoke a sense of a rich history that is inextricably linked to the surrounding farmed landscape. The landscape pattern has been weakened by the loss of hedgerow trees and the often poor condition and loss of hedgerows.
- 11.16 The visible **condition** of this landscape is variable but is judged to be **moderate** overall. It is a managed, farmed landscape yet the short flailing of hedges resulting a gappy, inconsistent structure is evident as is visitor pressure - at Kilve for example - resulting in erosion to footpaths, some congestion on lanes to the coast and damage to rural lanes due to traffic.

## Issues and Opportunities

- Increasing influence of the A39 in the landscape e.g. highways 'improvements', signage and overall levels of use.
- Kilve is a locally popular recreational site giving access to the beach. There is the potential for a change from rural backwater
- Loss of field boundaries and hedgerow trees through more intensive agricultural practice.
- Decline in condition of historic features in the landscape e.g. The Chantry at Kilve and the lime kiln at East Quantoxhead.
- Development of large buildings

character through increasing levels of recreation and tourism. There is a required sensitivity to ensure provision of supporting 'tourist' facilities remains low key.

- Adverse visual impacts of Hinkley Point nuclear power station in some views.
- Development and land use change to facilitate Hinkley Point C workers e.g. static caravans providing accommodation.
- Future of tenant farming to ensure continued, consistent management of the farmland.

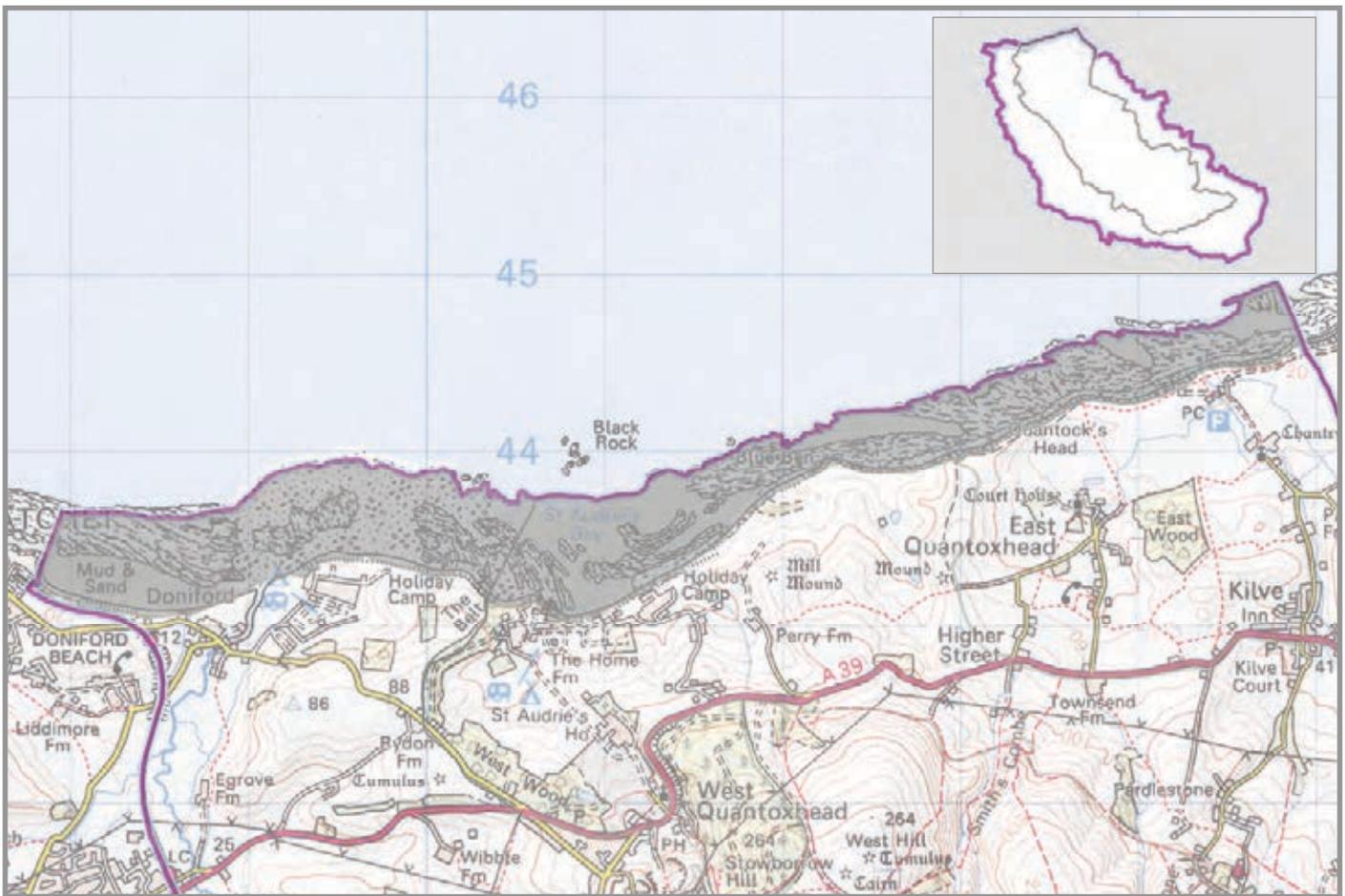
for agriculture and business has a marked visual impact.

- Arable cultivation adjacent to the coastline where intensive farming threatens the condition of the vulnerable, eroding coastal cliff edge.
- New cluster of development off the A39 changing the character of views.

## **Landscape Vision and Future Management**

Overall the vision for this landscape is to conserve the landscape's slow-pace, viable agricultural landscape, rural backwater character and the rich history of the coastal villages and estates.

There is a need to focus on landscape enhancement through restoring key landscape and archaeological features that have such a strong influence on landscape pattern, overall identity and sense of place. There is a need to sensitively manage levels of recreation and tourism to ensure the character of the landscape that people come to enjoy is not lost by the desire to increase the number and variety of visitor facilities.



## Key Characteristics

- **Intertidal landscape** of staggered blue lias **limestone terraces** and a **sandy bay** exposed at low tide.
- Backed by low cliffs that reveal layers of the Blue Lias Formation interspersed with Charmouth mudstone (shale) of the Triassic and Jurassic periods.
- **Rugged, windswept and exposed** landscape with a strong sense of vulnerability to the power of the tide.
- Many **fossilised animal remains** particularly ammonites, which can be clearly identified.
- Popular with visitors – **rock pooling and fossil hunting**.
- Strong visual **connection to the South Wales coastline** across the Bristol Channel.
- **Geological SSSI** with a cliff section near East Quantoxhead identified as a world reference point in the geological timescale.
- **Historic designed landscape features of the St Audries** and surviving parkland trees are visible from St Audries Bay.



## 12. Jurassic Coast

*This is not just a visually striking environment but one recognised as being scientifically important – designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) for its nationally significant geological exposures and fossils. The coastal edge of the AONB, designated as SSSI largely for its Jurassic geology, including foreshore and cliff habitats supports specific ranges of flora and fauna, primarily due to the alkaline, limestone cliffs. Specialised cliff-top biodiversity includes orchids, limestone grassland and invertebrates.*

*Quantock Hills AONB Management Plan (Draft) 2019-2024*

### Location and boundaries

- 12.1 Forming the northern edge of the designated landscape, the **Jurassic Coast** of the Quantock Hills is the foreshore landscape or intertidal zone that extends from Donford Beach in the west to Kilve Pill in the east. At low tide the coast is a combination of spectacular rocky terraces and sandy beach. This landscape type extends beyond the boundaries of the QLPS – as far west as Blue Anchor and beyond Lilstock in the east (corresponding with the geological SSSI boundary).

### Description

- 12.2 Forming part of the **Jurassic Coast** in Somerset that stretches from Blue Anchor to the east of the Lilstock, the section of this coastline falling within the QLPS area could be described as a landscape spectacle. The low cliffs at the back of the beach with their clearly identifiable layers of yellow and grey limestone (stacked with alternating, darker layers of shale) are no less dramatic on repeat visits to this rugged landscape of an almost otherworldly appearance.
- 12.3 At low tide the seas reveal a geological display of limestone in a series of complex sweeping terraces (with sand becoming more dominant to the west at St Audries Bay and Doniford Beach). The terraces provide not only dramatic scenery but also opportunities for recreation with rockpools and fossils aplenty (the characteristic spiral of ammonites often seen). Views across the channel clearly reveal the South Wales coastline.
- 12.4 In a number of locations, access to the beach is via steps cutting down the cliff face. At Kilve Pill access to the beach is straight from the green. Parking provision at Kilve Pill makes this a busy part of the coastline. Many visitors come for the sole purpose of accessing the beach and others for walking the coast path at the top of the low cliff (see *Lowland Hills to Coast*) or playing on the green. Although this is one of the busier locations within the AONB, tourism here is low-key and informal in nature. The appeal of the sandy bay at St Audries has led to the development of tourism in

the adjacent *Agricultural Foothills to Coast*. Static caravans surrounding the Home Farm complex of the Register Park and Garden<sup>48</sup> are prominent on the skyline in views from the beach, as are surviving parkland trees.

- 12.5 The historic designed landscape at the coastal edge of St Audries Park has recently suffered irreparable damage. The collapse of a section of the cliff face has led to the loss of the historic drive, flanked by cobbled stones, that led from the estate to the stone slipway used for landing Welsh coal for use in the estate gas works<sup>49</sup>. The stream running through St Audries Park flows through an artificial channel to appear as a cascade tumbling over the cliff face to the beach below. Vestiges of stonewalls built to prevent erosion of the cliff face are references to a long history of trying to protect the vulnerable cliff face from the onslaught of the channel waters.



Figure 12.1 Intrusive fencing and signage at St Audries Bay – facilitating access to the beach but insensitive to the nationally important historic landscape; reducing visual amenity of the coast.

- 12.6 This is a rugged, windswept place and the crumbling cliffs evoke a strong sense that this is an ever-changing landscape; hugely vulnerable to the erosive powers of the sea.

Nature Conservation Designations	
SSSI	Blue Anchor to Lilstock Coast (295.97ha)

## Evaluation

- 12.7 This is a landscape of **strong** character – the striking cliffs, sweeping limestone terraces and beaches and surviving historic designed landscape features make for an instantly recognisable and dramatic landscape that has an overriding wild and rugged physical character. The visible **condition** of this landscape is judged to be **moderate to poor** (the latter where the coastal erosion and land use/divided ownership is destroying heritage assets).

<sup>48</sup> On the Heritage At Risk Register (2018)

<sup>49</sup> <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1001155>

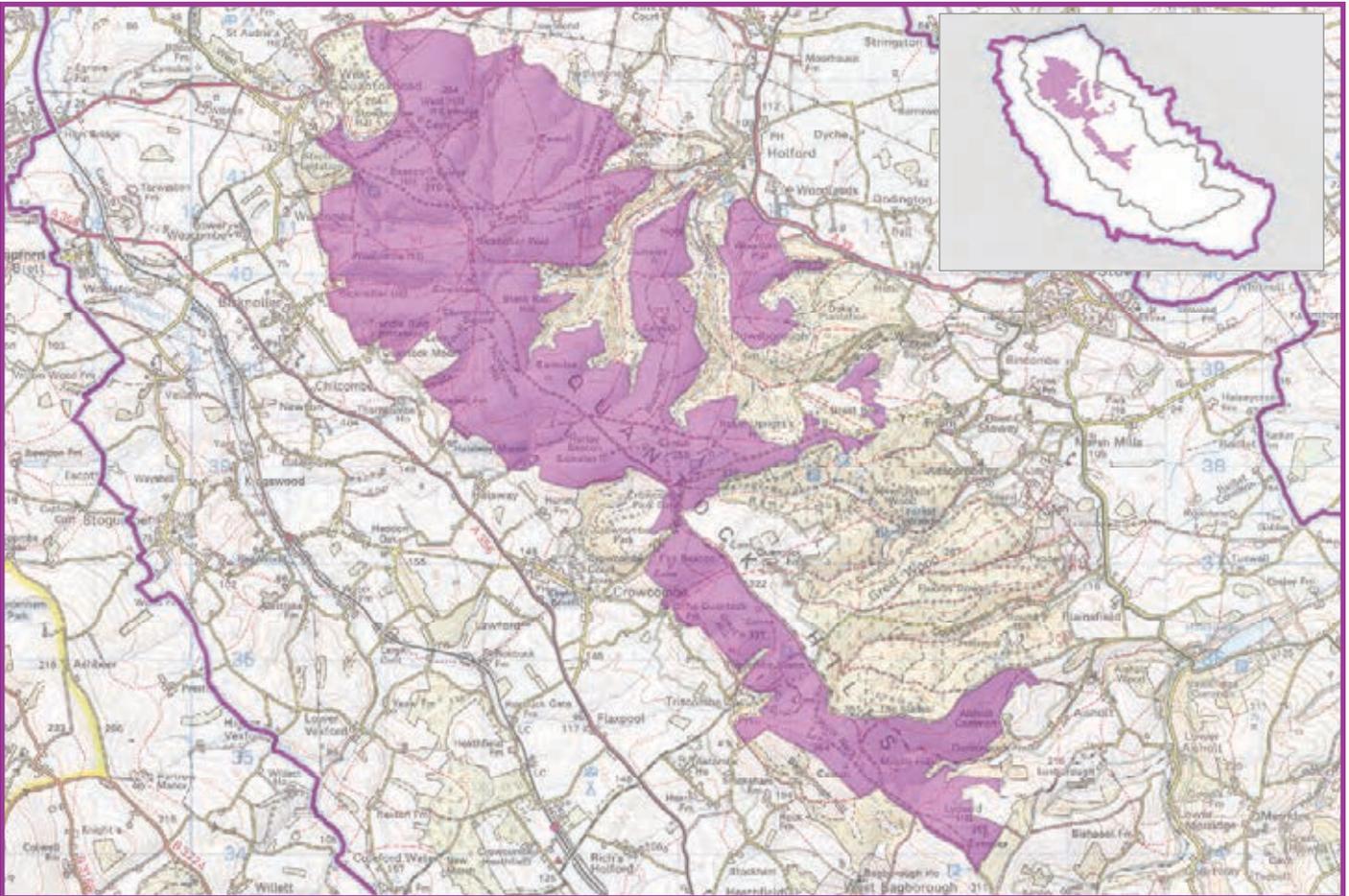
## **Issues and Opportunities**

- Potential for landscape character change (reduced tranquillity and backwater character) with tourism and recreation pressures.
- Damage to the geological SSSI caused by fossil hunting.
- Danger to the public due to unstable nature of the cliffs.
- Poor condition of historic designed landscape elements of St Audries Park (as reflected in its inclusion in the Historic England Heritage at Risk Register).
- Potential for increased infrastructure along the coastal cliffs to allow access to the beaches along the extended South West Coast Path.
- Litter washing up onto the beaches.
- Insensitive and visually intrusive fencing and provision of access to the beach at St Audries Registered Park and Garden as a result of recent cliff collapse.

## **Landscape Vision and Future Management**

There is a need to conserve the special character of the rugged, wild and exposed coastline ensuring human activity in the landscape does not detract from the physical spectacle of the place nor the condition of its internationally important geology. Seek sensitive, landscape-led solutions to access to the coast to ensure access paths and steps are not intrusive features.

# Heathland Hills and Combes



## Key Characteristics

- **Open exposed** landscape defined by **heathland land cover** (with areas of heather - ling, bell heather and cross-leaved heath, gorse, grasses, bracken, bilberry and scrub).
- **Dramatic landform of an undulating plateau dissected by open combes** (carved by the watercourses of issuing springs) creating a strongly articulated landscape of sinuous hills, ridges and valleys.
- Typically **occurring above 300m AOD** (reaching 385m AOD at the landscape's highest point) and falling away to as low as 150m AOD as the combes meet with the surrounding foothills.
- The heathland is underlain by **sedimentary bedrock of Devonian red sandstone** – Hangman Sandstone Formation.
- **Rare upland and lowland heath habitats** - much designated as a SSSI. Together with the adjacent upland oak woods, this landscape forms an extensive area of semi-natural habitat.
- **Archaeologically rich** – including Bronze Age ritual landscapes, Iron Age fortifications and former medieval enclosures.
- **Perceived as a large-scale landscape** that engenders a sense of **physical challenge** and **remoteness** although never far from settlement and human activity.
- **Extensive views** (many panoramic) both inland and to the coast.
- Predominantly **managed as common land** with low levels of grazing stock including sheep and ponies.
- **Wild red deer** are synonymous with this landscape.
- **Beech hedgebanks**, created by Parliamentary enclosure, are now linear strips of mature beech trees and are a distinctive boundary feature in places.
- A landscape of mixed recreational use – **walking, cycling and country pursuit**.

# Heathland Hills and Combes



## 13. Heathland Hills and Combes

*As you walk the Packway towards Crowcombe Park Gate, the hill called Hurley Beacon rises in front of you, another great barrow breaking the line of its ridge. A big round hill vividly painted by the gold and pink and purple of gorse, ling, and heather and by the scarlet-stained whortleberry leaves, these colours stressed by the neutral tones of dried grasses growing in rustling strawy patches.*

*Berta Lawrence, Quantock Country (1952)*

### Location and boundaries

- 13.1 The **Heathland Hills and Combes** landscape type is characterised by one largely continuous area that extends from West Hill in the north, out to Thorncombe Hill and Woodlands Hill (west and east respectively), narrowing to a pinch point at Crowcombe Park Gate before extending to the southeast across Great Hill and on to Aisholt Common and Lydeard Hill at its southernmost point. It sits wholly within the AONB.

### Description

- 13.2 The large scale, seasonally heather-clad **Heathland Hills and Combes** is an inspirational landscape that is widely cited throughout history in literature and art.
- 13.3 Forming the bulk of the AONB upland, this is perhaps the most distinctive and best recognised landscape of the Quantock Hills – for many the open heathy hilltops and combes are the Quantocks and are prized by walkers, horse riders, mountain bikers and those engaged in stag hunting. The heathland landscape is also much used by those who wish to purely sit and enjoy the many and varied views. The seasonal displays of deep purple heather and bright yellow gorse create dramatic colour and rich textures that are a spectacle from within the landscape as well as in views towards it. This is a typical Quantock landscape scene, which possessed the senses of Coleridge and Wordsworth inspiring their joint volume *Lyrical Ballads*<sup>50</sup>.

*That summer, under whose indulgent skies  
Upon smooth Quantocks airy ridge we roved  
Unchecked, or loitered' mid their sylvan combs;  
Thou, bewitching words with happy heart,  
Didst chaunt the vision of the Ancient Man,  
The bright-eyed Mariner, and rueful woes  
Didst utter of the Lady Christabel"*

*William Wordsworth (Prelude to the Lyrical Ballads).*

<sup>50</sup> *Lyrical Ballads*, Joint Publication by W Wordsworth and S T Coleridge (1798).

- 13.4 Springs issuing in this upland plateau have carved a series of plunging, open combes through the landscape – such as Vinny Combe, Weacombe and Bicknoller Combe. These radiate out from the hilltop summits into the foothills; dissecting the plateau to create a visually complex but repeating landform of broad rounded hills, narrow ridges and valleys. These sinuous and connected landforms, combined with their elevation, allow for far-reaching views - across surrounding low-lying farmland and beyond; taking in seascape views (across the Severn Estuary to Wales) and inland views - the Mendip Hills, the Blackdown Hills, and Exmoor being immediately apparent such that there is a strong visual and terrestrial link to other upland landscapes.
- 13.5 The hills are underlain by Devonian sandstone geology (Hangman Sandstone Formation<sup>51</sup>) – sedimentary bedrock formed between 393.3 and 387.7 million years ago<sup>52</sup>. Elevation of the hills and combes varies from as high as 385m AOD (Wills Neck – the highest point within the AONB) to 150m AOD where the combes meet with the surrounding farmland. Climbing up the combes from the foothills, the upland plateau reveals itself dramatically – opening up to offer broad vistas and panoramic views. Looking down through the combes, views are channelled and this has historically been exploited in historic landscape design to make the most of the fine scenery afforded – the church of St Etheldreda and the house of St Audries sited at to be prominent features, with the sea beyond, in views down through Vinny Combe.
- 13.6 The open and elevated hills, their exposure to the elements and the wide skies evoke a perceived sense of expanse, solitude and physical challenge, which is more akin to much larger moorland landscapes. This apparent sense of remoteness and isolation is not the reality – the central plateau of the heathland being rarely more than a kilometre from the enclosed and settled farmland of the foothills below. This is nonetheless an exposed landscape whose relationship with the elements directly influences its character – changing from seemingly comfortable and safe on a clear sunny day to a hostile, even threatening, environment when the fog, rain or snow comes down.
- 13.7 It is the heathland plateau that forms the distinctive open Quantock ridgeline and this has stayed free from modern infrastructure such as turbines or masts – the unbroken ridge providing an unchanging and constant backdrop to people’s lives. The perceived ‘wild’ character of the heathland is strikingly juxtaposed to the tamed, managed farmland of the surrounding low-lying hinterland.
- 13.8 Red deer are synonymous with this landscape – the roaring of the males during the rutting season at dawn and dusk heightening the sense of ‘closeness to nature’ that

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<sup>51</sup> Thick sequence mainly of grey, purple and green quartzitic fine- to medium-grained sandstone  
(<https://www.bgs.ac.uk/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?pub=TGR>)

<sup>52</sup> <http://mapapps.bgs.ac.uk/geologyofbritain3d/index.html?>

is central to the human experience of the heathland. The heathland is rich in wildlife.

- 13.9 Although perceptually a natural landscape, the summits and combes would once have been cloaked with forest. However, however bronze-age barrows and other sites requiring visibility show that large areas of the hilltop were cleared in prehistoric times. The landscape is now managed as heathland with woodland now restricted to some of the combes and the eastern hill flanks. Most of the area is Common land - grazed by commoners' ponies and sheep (and cattle) and often referred to as 'the common'. Grazing alone is not sufficient to manage and sustain the heathland cover and swaling (heather burning) in the winter months is a very visual reminder of the requirement for ongoing heathland management through human intervention. The removal of extensive areas of invasive rhododendron in recent years has given a renewed appreciation for the smooth lines of the landform, revealed through vegetation clearance.

*We crept out of Nether Stowey and made our way westward through tangled conifers whose clawing branches blocked out the world above us; after a while the track plateaued onto a vast hilltop, carpeted with thick heather and gorse. No flowers bloomed here; the gorse had been burnt as part of a heathland conservation scheme, and now stood dark and twisted against the slate sky.*

Tiffany Francis<sup>53</sup>

- 13.10 This is an archaeologically rich landscape and the presence of barrows and cairns are clear references to its importance as a historic ritual landscape during the Bronze Age from about 4000 years ago. Other earthworks are also evident, such as the Iron-age enclosure of Trendle Ring.
- 13.11 There is a strong visual link between the heathland landscapes and the *Forested Hills and Combes* – the dense mixed woodland of Great Wood and Seven Wells Wood visible on the horizon from much heathland in the south. The forest edges are a dense and dark contrast to the open undulating heath and the juxtaposition of the two landscapes illustrate that, whilst sharing the same physical conditions, differences in land use and land management have created two visually contrasting landscape types.
- 13.12 Views from the heathland of the expanding urban areas surrounding the Quantock Hills – Taunton, Minehead and Bridgwater - and to notable structures such as the currently expanding nuclear power station at Hinkley Point are clear reminders that the Quantock Hills is a little-populated island landscape – removed from, yet vulnerable to, the effects of concentrated human activity nearby.

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<sup>53</sup> <https://wordsworth.org.uk/blog/2017/07/06/in-the-footsteps-of-coleridge-in-the-quantocks/>

13.13 Beech hedgebanks and mature beech trees are distinctive features on the southern edge of the plateau (the old drove road an obvious example where the stone-faced banks bursting at the seams by mature beech standards are noteworthy features in their own right as well as important historic references) and occasional clumps of Scots Pine draw the eye within a landscape of largely ground-hugging vegetation.



Figure 13.1 Outgrown beech hedges compromising the condition of stone faced banks along the old drove road.

13.14 There is little in the way of large infrastructural features in the *Open Heathland* landscape although pylon lines crossing at West Hill do detract from the essentially uninterrupted landscape. Car parks or parking areas and the infrastructure associated with these e.g. interpretation boards, gated entrances and parking control measures such as bollards are marked features in the landscape and, whilst making the landscape more accessible, the localised sense of 'country park' character in places is evident – diluting to some degree the seemingly natural and rugged environment for which the heathland landscape is recognised and valued.

Nature Conservation Designations	
Ancient Woodland (Total area)	7.50ha
SAC	Exmoor & Quantock Oakwoods (11.68ha)
SSSI	The Quantocks (1698.96ha)

<b>Historic Environment Designations</b>	
Registered Park and Gardens	Crowcombe Court (Grade II)
Scheduled Monuments	36

## Evaluation

- 13.15 A landscape of **strong** character – the distinctive heather-clad hills, ridges and combes are recognised as synonymous with the Quantock Hills and, for many, as the defining landscape of this Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The moorland character, the perceived sense of remoteness, the rich archaeological history, the wild red deer and the strong visual relationship with the surrounding lowland landscapes makes this a highly characteristic, instantly recognisable landscape with significant cultural value.
- 13.16 In 2009 the failure of 71% of the main Quantock SSSI to meet the government condition target of ‘favourable’ or ‘unfavourable recovering’ was seen as a very significant threat. These assessments (2002 - 2006) reflected a lack of regeneration in the oakwoods, and areas of heathland where appropriate management was not in place. More recent Natural England surveys (up to July 2013) show that almost 92% of the SSSI now meets the target of favourable or unfavourable recovering condition<sup>54</sup>. The visible **condition** of the **Heathland Hills and Combes** landscape type is **variable** with some areas in good condition and others in a poorer state. Areas of recreational pressure are evident – erosion around car parks for example as well as tracks cut across the plateau are very apparent in places.

### Issues and Opportunities

- Declining physical condition of the landscape due to recreational pressure e.g. damage to heathland vegetation, archaeological features and scarring of the landscape where tracks are cut by off road vehicles, vehicles parking on the edge of the roadside, walkers, horse and bike riders.
- Reduced sense of wilderness/remoteness due to provision of facilities to meet demands of recreational use e.g.
- Threats to high visual amenity of the landscape (and remote character) through potentially significant development and/or land use change in lower lying landscapes.
- Loss of mature beech trees and hedgebanks. Opportunities to explore grant funding to implement management approach so trees are varied in age and size to ensure longevity of the banks into the future.
- Potential for development of

<sup>54</sup> Quantock Hills AONB Draft Management Plan (2019-2024)

car parking, interpretation boards, bollards in places. Some car parking is more discreet such as at Triscombe and Dead Woman's Ditch.

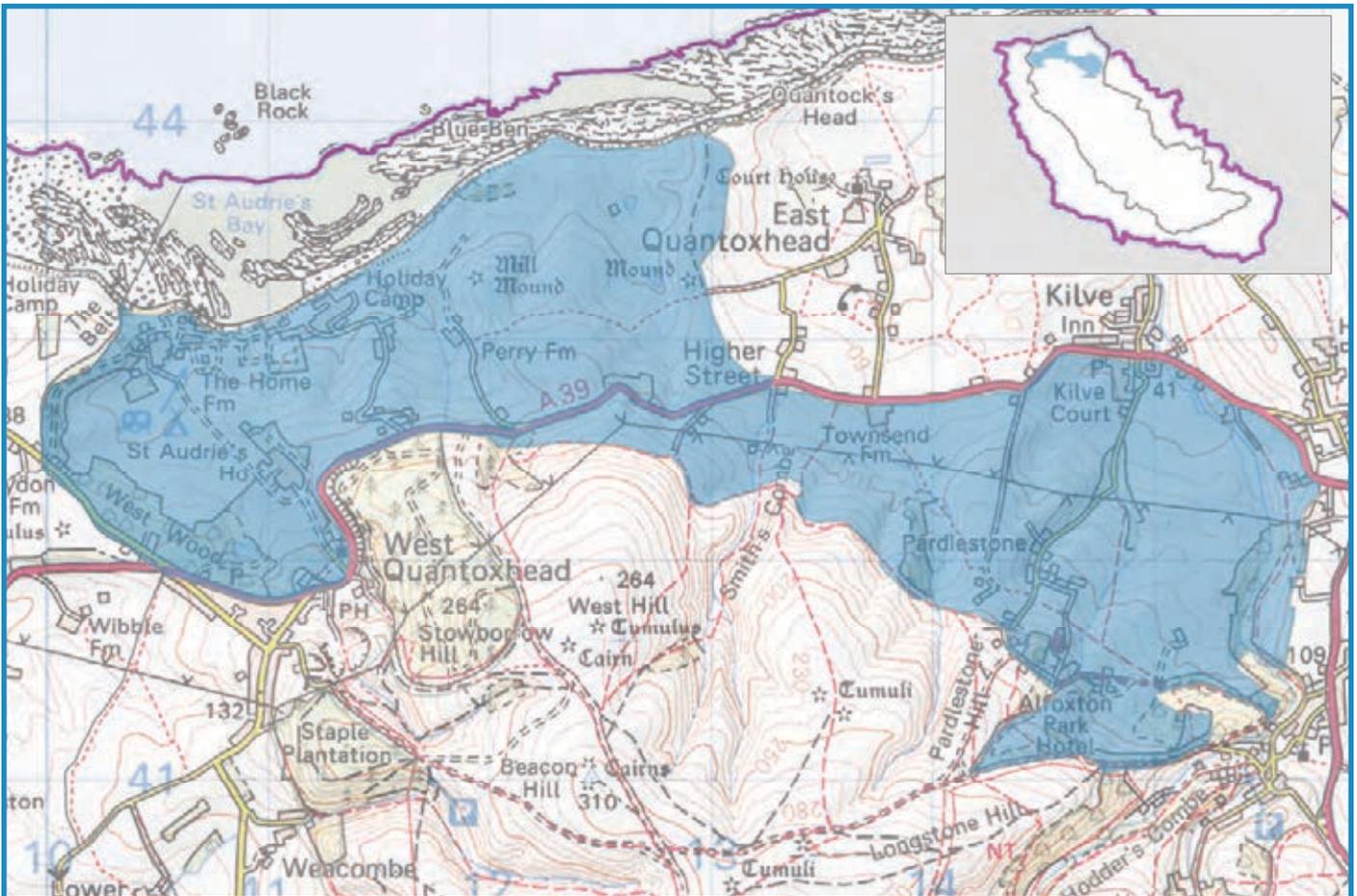
- Colonisation and encroachment of scrub in some areas of the common due to undergrazing – reducing open nature of the hills and changing the character of the landscape in both close and long distance views. Opportunity for discussions around re-naturalisation (refer to Chapter 6).
- Reduced sense of 'remoteness' due to use of the hills for recreation.

communication infrastructure/masts on the main ridge; threatening the open nature of the hilltop.

- Reduced sense of 'wilderness' due to increasing amounts of development in lower lying landscapes.
- Invasion and spread of rhododendron.
- Bracken and gorse encroachment.

### **Landscape Vision and Future Management**

The current vision for the **Heathland Hills and Combes** is to ensure the characteristically wild and seemingly remote moorland character remains inherent to this large scale landscape and that it's wildlife and archaeology-rich, simple, open and exposed character pervades into the future to continue to offer big scale views across the wider Quantock landscape and beyond. Management in the future however may have to adapt changing social-economic and environmental conditions e.g. viability of hill farming on the heathland and changing climatic conditions and its impact on rates of natural succession. There should be a focus on enhancing the connection/juxtaposition between the heathland and forested hills for both landscape character and nature conservation benefits.



## Key Characteristics

- **Dramatic views** – inland to the **backdrop of purple heather-clad hills** of the upland heath and, **contrastingly out to sea**.
- **Undulating landform** created where watercourses from springs issuing on the hills have carved a series of **small valleys with intervening ridges**.
- **Underlain by Triassic geology** of **mudstone and conglomerate** (Mercia Mudstone Group).
- Elevation ranges from approximately 140m AOD at the base of the heathland hills to as low as 30m AOD at the top of the coastal cliffs.
- **Land use of mixed farming with pasture typically focused in smaller fields** on more challenging terrain closer to the adjacent heathland.
- **The arterial route of the A39** carrying traffic to and from Minehead and beyond to the north Devon coast through the rural landscape.
- **Designed parkland landscapes around large country houses/manors**.
- **Modern day recreational land uses in the form of holiday villages** (caravan and holiday parks) on the coast.
- **Swathes of woodland** predominantly occurring on the higher slopes.

# Agricultural Fringe to Coast



## 14. Agricultural Fringe to Coast

### Location and boundaries

- 14.1 This landscape type occurs on the northern side of the upland heath; wrapping around the heathland hills and sweeping right down to meet with the Jurassic coast. In the east it merges seamlessly with the *Lowland Hills to Coast* landscape type – the two landscapes separated by changes in elevation, geology, landform and the borrowed character from surrounding landscapes.

### Description

- 14.2 The **Agricultural Fringe to Coast** is a landscape of great variety within a relatively small area – being the transition between the inland landscape of the prominent *Heathland Hills and Combes* and the contrasting rugged landscape of the Jurassic Coast. This landscape merges with the *Lowland Hills to Coast* landscape type – the change in character here being notably subtle.
- 14.3 This **Agricultural Fringe to Coast** is closely linked in character to the ‘upper reaches’ of the ‘River Valley and Agricultural Fringe’ landscape abutting the heathland hills on the western side of the Quantocks. Although the two landscapes share a contiguous boundary (just below West Quantoxhead) they have different characters due to the influence of their adjacent landscapes – one borrowing character from the landscape of rolling valleys and ridges of the Brendon Hills and Exmoor and, the other, strongly influenced by its juxtaposition with the coast and the lower lying landscape of the *Lowland Hills to Coast*. So, although the physical and human influences of these landscapes are largely the same, they feel markedly different.
- 14.4 This is a landscape with three main land uses – farming, designed parkland surrounding large country houses and modern recreational landscape in the form of holiday villages along the coast. Horse keeping is also evident with fields divided by post and rail or wire and tape. West Wood and Aldergrove Copse form a significant swathe of woodland running from the coast up to the A39 at West Quantoxhead.
- 14.5 The underlying geology of mudstone with conglomerate (Mercia Mudstone Group) gives rise to moderate to highly fertile loamy, sometimes clayey soils. This is an enclosed landscape of native hedgerows. Where arable production dominates, there has been historic enlargement of fields with the loss of hedgerows, for example in the area to the south of Townsend Farm. Much of the landscape is given over to pasture, typically within small field units on higher ground, where the challenging terrain is unsuited to mechanisation (around Pardlestone Lane for example).

14.6 Large country houses or manors and their surrounding landscapes make a notable contribution to landscape character – Kilve Court, Alfoxton Park and St Audries Park all impart a designed influence on the landscape. St Audries is the largest and most significant – the Grade II listed house located within 112 ha (of which 105 is designed parkland). Deterioration of these listed buildings is apparent and current management and land use within the designed landscape (holiday park) suggests a lack of sensitivity to these heritage assets. Alfoxton Park is culturally significant because of its link with the romantic poets – Coleridge and Wordsworth. William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy resided at Alfoxton for a year between 1797 and 1798 and from here they would roam, with Coleridge, across the Quantock landscape, absorbing themselves in their surroundings and being inspired by what they saw.

*That part of Kilve close to the main road really is the old hamlet of Putsham, called "Potsdam" by Dorothy Wordsworth in her Journal. Here she sheltered from rain under the fir trees and once she set out from Alfoxton to look at the cottage gardens here ... It seems certain that from Alfoxton she followed Pardlestone Lane down – dropping from the hills to Kilve and so wet from a Quantock streamlet hurrying to the sea that primroses grow abundantly among mosses and hart's tongues".*

*Berta Lawrence (1952) 'Quantock Country'*

14.7 Modern recreational land use has a strong influence on landscape character in the form of holiday villages, with camping, static caravans and other accommodation. Whilst these cover a large part of the land adjacent to the coast, their presence is mainly felt through advertising along the A39 as well as in views towards the coastal cliffs from the foreshore of the Jurassic Coast. Their position within the designed landscape of St Audries means that they nestle into the folds of the landform and are therefore often hidden in views. There are some holiday chalets inland (at Pardlestone Lane) which do not enhance the character of the AONB at the edge of the heathland hills.

14.8 There are no settlements within this landscape; development being limited to scattered farms.

Nature Conservation Designations	
Ancient Woodland (Total area)	26.23ha
SAC	Exmoor & Quantock Oakwoods (0.1ha)
SSSI	Blue Anchor to Lilstock Coast (9.8ha)
	Ge-Mare Farm Fields (4.04ha)
	The Quantocks (34.36ha)

Historic Environment Designations	
Listed Buildings	Grade II* (2)
	Grade II (22)
Registered Park and Gardens	St Audries house (Grade II)

## Evaluation

- 14.9 Although a transitional landscape – marking the change from upland heath to coast, the combination of a strongly articulated landform, limited development, large country houses and historic parkland, and exposed coast creates a landscape of **strong character**.
- 14.10 The visible **condition** of this landscape is judged to be **moderate** overall. Hedgerow pattern and structure is weak in places and the parkland at St Audries is on the English Heritage ‘at risk’ register.

## Issues and Opportunities

- Pressure along the coast with potential for increased advertising/expansion of holiday parks; affecting visual amenity and character.
- Loss of historic landscape (generally unsatisfactory<sup>55</sup>) fabric and character at St Audries due to divided ownership and inconsistent approach to management.
- Potential for further conversion to arable production on steeper slopes where currently given over to pasture, leading to a loss of landscape pattern (no need to manage hedgerows for stock) and increase water run off to lower ground increasing risk and amount of flooding.
- Large agricultural buildings being
- Highway and infrastructure improvements and traffic management along the A39 – increasing its aural and visual influence in the landscape.
- Coastal erosion of the sandstone and mudstone cliffs causing loss of features of the historic designed landscape at St Audries. For issues related to the coastal edge see *Jurassic Coast*.
- Break up of traditional farmsteads and conversion of farm buildings and loss of unified management of land previously under one owner/tenant.
- Conversion of traditional pasture ‘horsiculture’ leading to the subdivision of field with tape and fencing.

<sup>55</sup> <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1001155>

incongruous features in the landscape. Opportunities for the AONB Service to engage with the Local Planning Authority regarding guidance for re-use of agricultural buildings.

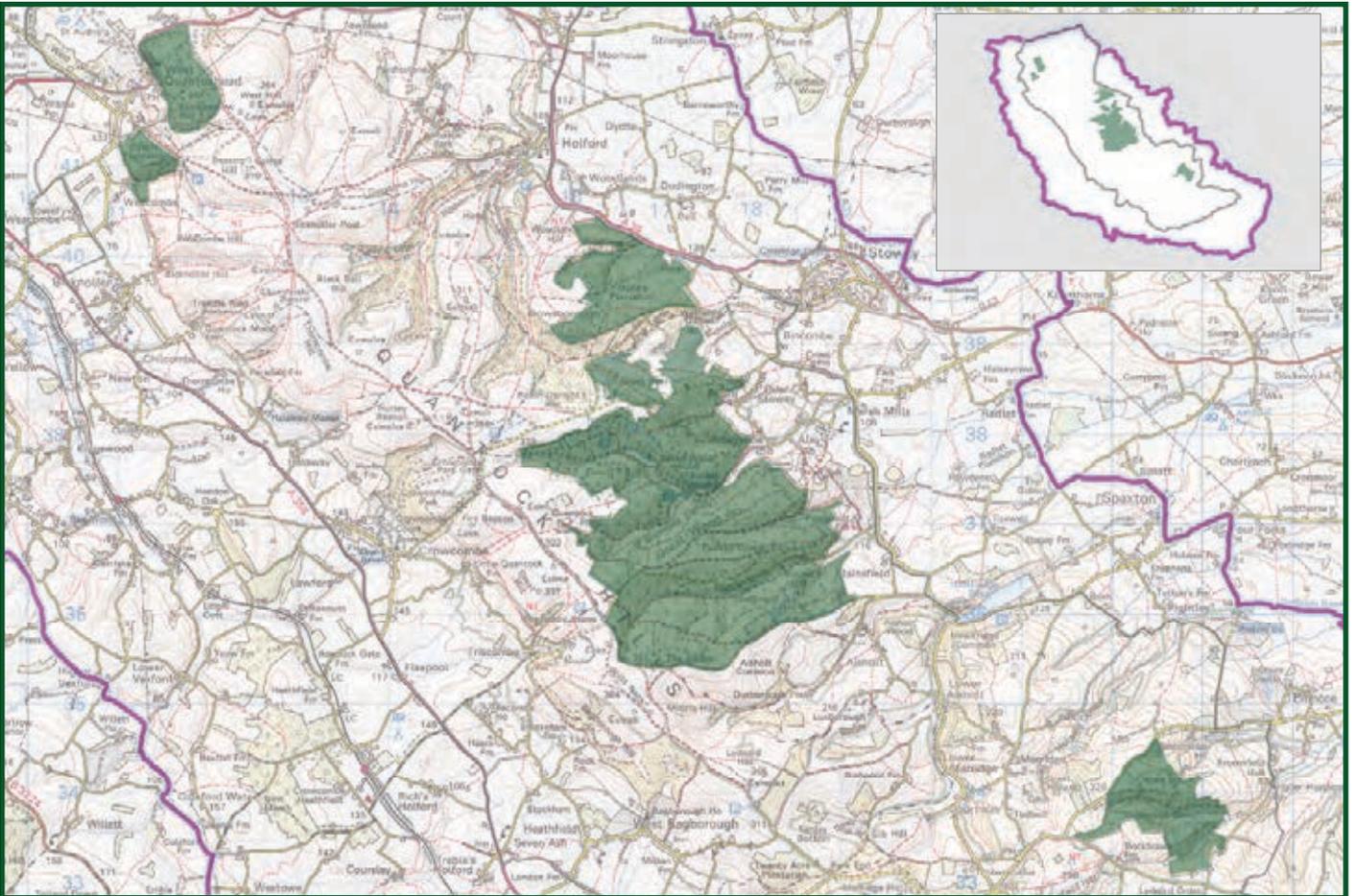
- Decline of Alfoxton Park and with it the connection to the Romantic Poets and the cultural significance phase in the Quantock's history. New ownership may bring opportunities for sympathetic restoration and sensitive interpretation.

- Potential for empty barn complexes to be converted to residential use.
- Potential for quality of views to be affected by development and land use change on lower slopes.
- Infrastructure along the coastal cliffs to allow access to the beaches and the Coast Path.

### **Landscape Vision and Future Management**

The vision for the future is of a landscape whose overriding character is a mixed farming landscape bound by dense hedgerows (and hedgerow trees) interspersed with small woods and scattered settlement and with its designed landscape and country houses in good condition. The simple yet striking contrast between the farmland and adjacent heathland and the quality of coastal views should be protected.

# Forested Hills and Combes



## Key Characteristics

- A landscape dominated by productive **conifer plantation**, interspersed with **broadleaf woodland and, in places, Sessile oak woodland**.
- Occurring amongst a **setting of heathland and farmland** on areas of mid to high ground (approximately 115m AOD at St Audries to 320m AOD at Great Wood).
- **Blanket forest often disguises the dramatic landform**, which is characterised by hills and ridges dropping away into deep combes.
- Underlain by sedimentary bedrock of **sandstone and slates of the Devonian period** (Hangman Sandstone Formation and Ilfracombe Slates Formation).
- Predominantly managed by the Forestry Commission and the National Trust, the forests are a **focus for recreation** as well as **timber production**.
- **Significant archaeological value** with a number of scheduled monuments occurring within the forest.
- **Beech hedgebanks** of various stages of maturity and condition within and on the edges of the forests.
- Influence of the surrounding heathland and farmland strongly felt in **open views at the edge of the forests**.
- **Transient forest** – timber felling and extraction making previously treed and enclosed landscapes instantly open and exposed.

Forested Hills and Combes



## 15. Forested Hills and Combes

### Location and boundaries

- 15.1 The **Forested Hills and Combes** landscape type occurs in four areas of high ground within the AONB. Three of the four areas immediately abut or are surrounded by the *Heathland Hills and Combes* landscape type in the northern half of the AONB; having an immediate and very marked interface with the open heath. The fourth area is located further south, set within the *Rolling Farmland with Settled Combes*.

### Landscape Type

- 15.2 Dominated by coniferous plantation the **Forested Hills and Combes** occur in prominent locations on mid to high ground and are clearly discernible in many Quantock views (both internal and external). In places, where they breach the horizon, they form notable dark edges on the skyline; the geometric conifer-tops often in stark contrast with the rounded, organic forms and more muted hues of the wider Quantock landscape. It would be wrong however to assume that this forest landscape is solely defined by conifer blocks. Broadleaved woodland is a key component of this landscape type – with native and naturalised species making up almost 30% of the forests managed by the Forestry Commission land (Quantock Forest)<sup>56</sup> with concentrations typical where soils are richer such as in the valley bottoms. Larch is also a key species<sup>57</sup> and in one of the Character Areas (see *Great Wood to Dukes Plantation*), coniferous plantation gives way to the sessile oak woodlands that extend up onto the hills from the adjacent wooded combes. Sensitivity to landscape character has been recognised by the Forestry Commission in more recent years and different approaches to forest design have been adopted; helping to soften the edges of the plantations that often form an awkward interface with the organic, sinuous landscape of the Quantocks.
- 15.3 Areas of open space and numerous tracks and public rights of way make this a landscape valued for its opportunities for low key recreation – typically walking, running, cycling and horse riding.
- 15.4 These areas of forest (managed for timber supply, wildlife and recreation) make up a significant proportion of the AONB. This means that whilst the open heathland

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<sup>56</sup> This figure is inclusive of two additional Forestry Commission forests (Goathurst and Kings Cliff) that are not part of the landscape types listed above and which have the highest relative proportion of broadleaves and excludes Staple Plantation which does form part of this landscape type but is owned by the National Trust.

<sup>57</sup> Significant removal of larch has occurred in some areas due to the threat of *Phytophthora ramorum*.

landscape and rolling farmland are perhaps more commonly regarded as quintessential Quantock landscapes, the eye catching appearance of the forests, their prominent positions and the large areas they cover makes them a significant contributor to the character of this nationally protected landscape.

- 15.5 Management of the forest by clear felling for timber extraction has meant this is a changeable landscape (transient forest) - previously tree-covered areas are quickly cleared to reveal an open and exposed landscape that has an immediate impact on perceptual character. Clear felling operations are reducing as timber extraction (through a management system of continuous cover) is increasing. So, whilst clear-felling operations are set to continue into the future, the sudden and abrupt change to the landscape should lessen, as there is an increased focus on thinning and selective extraction.
- 15.6 The tree cover of the forests significantly disguises the drama of the underlying landform - characterised by the hills and ridges of the upland plateau - that falls away into deep cut combes. The forests also hide a number of nationally significant archaeological sites. The forest edges offer commanding views across heathland and farmland.
- 15.7 The forests provide habitat for a range of species including the red deer as well as many species of birds from raptors such as goshawks and long-eared owls, to smaller species such as crossbills, redpolls, goldcrest and woodcock. Over the last three decades the population of the nightjar has significantly increased in large part due to maturity of major stands of conifers being felled, creating their ideal habitat.

## **Character Areas**

- 15.8 There are four distinct areas characterised as the **Forested Hills and Combes** landscape type. There are other areas of forest that are not categorised within this landscape type because they are subsumed and described as part of other landscape types as appropriate e.g. Buncombe Wood and Twenty Acre Plantation which form part of the wider *Wooded and Farmed Escarpment* landscape type and smaller forest blocks such as Muchcare and Hawkridge Wood which are features within the wider landscape of the *Rolling Farmland and Settled Combes*.<sup>58</sup>

### ***Great Wood to Shervage Wood***

- 15.9 By far the largest and best known area of the **Forested Hills and Combes** is Great Wood, covering an area of 629 hectares. Occupying a central position within the protected landscape, Great Wood is made up of three main west-east combes

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<sup>58</sup> The Forestry Commission have a policy to manage and inspect wild trails – these are downhill routes that cut through the forest and are predominantly used by mountain bikers. They are constantly being adapted (typically using fallen timber within the forest) by those seeking a challenging downhill mountain bike experience.

(Ramscombe, Quantock Combe and Cockercombe) which together create a strongly articulated landscape of tight, deep valleys and ridges. The streams in these combes are fed by springs – issuing within and on the western edge of the forest - which form part of the River Parrett catchment. Keepers Combe is a lesser combe, occurring in the east of Great Wood.

- 15.10 Much of this character area is owned by the Forestry Commission but the area extends north of Great Wood, to include broadleaf woodland and further plantation (Duke Plantation – privately owned) and areas of sessile oak woodland – at Shervage Wood in the far north of the area and some areas immediately adjacent to the sessile oak-filled combes (such as at Dowsborough Hill) where the ‘fairy like’ woodland extends up and onto the hills.



*Figure 15.1 Interspersing the plantations are some localised areas of ex-coppice sessile oak woodland – extending onto the hills from the combes.*

- 15.11 Great Wood (along with St Audries) has the greatest proportion of conifer cover – Douglas fir and Sitka spruce – with broadleaf woodland comprising beech and oak with ash, sycamore and birch. The current Forestry Commission Quantock Forest Management Plan clearly states that there will be a ‘significant transformation’ over the coming decades as the focus is for native broadleaves to dominate the woodland of Great Wood.
- 15.12 Great Wood was planted in the 1920s on the site of ancient woodland known to have existed since Saxon times. Whilst it is dominated by conifer plantation, Great Wood is significantly more than a commercial forest - recreation, in particular, is central to its use and overall character. Most notably the valley bottom at Ramscombe has a strong recreational focus – the stream bank frequently covered with people barbequing and picnicking alongside the water. A series of pay and display car parks, a toilet block and a number of interpretation panels and information signs evoke a sense of a landscape that is purposefully and actively managed for public enjoyment. In the busy spring and summer months Great Wood is a hive of activity and is a destination point in the Quantocks for local people and visitors alike.



Figure 15.2 Events room and streamside picnic provision (both Ramscombe).

- 15.13 The timber extraction tracks and the many public rights of way provide an all ability trail, promoted by the Forestry Commission for a wide range of users – walkers, dog walkers, cyclists and horse riders. Great Wood is especially popular with mountain bikers who create off-track downhill routes through the forest<sup>3</sup>. Approximately 10% of Great Wood is made up of open land – dedicated open space, deer lawns, forests rides and temporary open space in areas of extraction and felling.
- 15.14 Moving along the extraction tracks, the link to the surrounding upland heath landscape is clear – with the forest edges and rides characterised by heathland regeneration and scrub. The outcropping heather and bilberry gives a definitive connection to the underlying physical conditions that are shared by these visually very different landscape types.
- 15.15 The Iron Age hillfort (and associated Bronze Age round barrow) and Scheduled Monument of Dowsborough Hillfort occurs within the forest – occupying a prominent hilltop location that would have once been open to provide a strategic location with great prospect in all directions. The hillfort has been added to the Heritage at Risk register due to vulnerability to vehicle erosion and damage.
- 15.16 The scheduled monument of Plainsfield Camp hillfort is in the southeast of the forest. It is enclosed by a massive bank and ditch and although previously covered with trees, it is now open and offers extensive views across the Levels and onto the Mendip Hills. The Scheduled Monument of Dead Woman’s ditch (cross-dyke) is also within Great Wood and has recently been cleared of trees by the Forestry Commission. Unlike Plainsfield Camp and Dead Woman’s Ditch, Dowsborough is largely covered with sessile oak woods extending up into the forested hills from the *Enclosed Wooded Combes*, and as such is difficult to discern in the landscape.
- 15.17 Beech hedgebanks are a feature of the northern and southern boundaries of Great Wood and these create an impressive edge to the forest where it meets the open heath such as at Aisholt Common. There are outcropping areas of rhododendron in the forest but targeted rhododendron clearance has taken place in recent years in Cockercombe and Ramscombe primarily to reduce the risk of infectious disease

being spread (by removing rhododendron as a host species to *Phytophthora ramorum*).

- 15.18 There has been a significant amount of clear felling at The Slades - adjacent to Aisholt Common - to encourage heathland regeneration and species such as nightjar. Whilst the area has been cleared, regeneration of Sitka Spruce is occurring at the site.

### **Wind Down**

- 15.19 Wind Down is the most southerly character area belonging to the *Forested Hills and Combes* landscape type.
- 15.20 Wind Down is surrounded by enclosed farmland and is believed to have once formed part of the Enmore Estate (linked to the previous Enmore Castle) that historically held a mix of productive woodland; most of which has long since been cleared. Wind Down is leased by the Forestry Commission and whilst it is not promoted or managed as a site for recreation, the tracks and paths through the forest are popular with dog walkers, runners and horse riders.
- 15.21 Two tributary streams running west to east have carved steep valleys through the landscape at Wind Down and, as with the streams of Great Wood, these form part of the River Parrett catchment. The land falls dramatically away from the access tracks in places, creating a visually interesting and challenging terrain.
- 15.22 Hidden within the woodland at Wind Down is the Scheduled Monument of Ruborough Camp which was probably constructed between 600 and 300 BC. It may have had a number of functions – defended settlement, keeping stock, trading, ritual and warfare (Riley, 2006). It is one of three hilltop camps within the Quantock Hills (the others being Dowsborough Camp and the incomplete enclosure at Bicknoller). Ruborough Camp sits on a northeastwardly projecting spur of a ridge that extends into Wind Down from the open hilltop landscape of Broomfield Hill. This spur overlooks much of the eastern foothills landscape of the Quantocks and the wider River Parrett Catchment extending across the Somerset Levels – with views to the Polden Hills and Mendip Hills. Ruborough Camp is cloaked in woodland and this not only disguises its presence but also the striking physical character of its location and the sheer scale of the earthworks (Riley, 2006).
- 15.23 Wind Down is a mixed woodland of broadleaf and conifer plantation. Significant areas of larch have been cleared in recent years due to *Phytophthora ramorum*. Beech hedgebanks (with overgrown beech standards) are a feature at Wind Down – both within the forest and around its edges.
- 15.24 Where views out of the forest are possible they are extensive – across the rolling farmland and combes to the foothills of the Quantocks and on to the Severn Estuar across to Wales. Inland, views east look out across the Levels to the Polden and

Mendip Hills beyond. Because of its prominent position Wind Down is identifiable from considerable distance in views towards the hills.

### **St Audries**

- 15.25 Once forming part of the wider Quantoxhead Estate - as a deer park - St Audries (or 'Deer Park') characterises the northern end of the 'hills'; between the open heath of West Hill, Vinny Combe and Beacon Hill. It is less than a kilometre from the coast at St Audries Bay – rising steeply to the south of the main A39 and having a northwesterly aspect, the heavily treed landscape falling away from Stowborough Hill towards the coast.
- 15.26 St Audries is less mixed in its cover than the other forested areas – being predominantly conifer. The woodland of St Audries is prominent in views from the settled and farmed landscape to the west. It is also prominent in views from the south. Here, there is a conspicuous interface between landscape character types as dark conifer abuts the open heathland. Recently an area around Stowborough Hill in the far southeast of the landscape has been clear felled. The intention is for this area to remain permanently open – providing a visually more sensitive transition to the surrounding heath.



Figure 15.3 St Audries plantation from the A39 (left) and looking across the historic parkland landscape of St Audries to the plantation and clear felled area at Stowborough Hill (right).

- 15.27 A notable feature of this woodland is the iron boundary fence, encompassing the southern, eastern and western woodland boundaries it forms a clear visual reference that this formed part of the parkland and designed landscape of St Audries estate.

### **Staple Plantation**

- 15.28 Staple Plantation is owned and managed by the National Trust. This forest, for many years, provided a strong backdrop to West Quantoxhead and Weacombe – having an easterly aspect and being visually prominent in views from the west. However, the site has been clear felled in recent years due to its large larch content and the need to slow down the impact and spread of *Phytophthora ramorum* with which the woodland was infected. This, combined with the loss of a large proportion of the site's Douglas Fir (through windblow) led to the decision to clear

the site. It has now been replanted with rowan, Scots pine, sessile oak and birch but is very much young woodland.

<b>Nature Conservation Designations</b>	
Ancient Woodland (Total area)	518.82ha
SSSI	The Quantocks (3.42ha)
<b>Historic Environment Designations</b>	
Registered Park and Gardens	St Audries house (grade II)
Scheduled Monuments	3

## Evaluation

15.29 This is a landscape type of **strong character**. The forests are instantly recognisable landscapes that occupy prominent, elevated positions within the Quantocks. The striking blanket coverage of conifer, broadleaved woodland and sessile oak woodland largely disguises physical features of the landscape i.e. the natural and dramatic topography and archaeological features. There is a strong sense of connection to a wider 'designed' landscape in some cases with the presence of beech hedgebanks and features typical of local estates (such as the presence of Lodge houses on the forest edges and iron deer fencing such as around Stowborough Hill, forming part of the old deer park of St Audries).

The forest landscapes are perceived to be in **good** condition generally as they are under active forestry management. Nonetheless, there are features within the forest that are in a poorer state of repair – such as the Schedule Monuments at risk. In places where clear felling has occurred for the purpose of heathland restoration, the landscape is very much in a state of transition with varying degrees of restoration success.

### Issues and Opportunities

- Impact of dark coniferous blocks often jarring against the muted tones and softer, rounded forms of the wider Quantock landscape. And surrounding vegetation.
- Condition of archaeological features occurring in the forest - some are nationally important and fundamental to an holistic understanding of human influence on the Quantock
- Low key recreational activities within the forest may expand to larger leisure ventures with an increase in facilities to support such use (e.g. accommodation, cafes, bike hire) that could change the character of the Quantock forests by reducing tranquillity through high visitor numbers - particularly relevant to Great Wood. However the forests

landscape. Opportunities for a project that would see the combined re-opening (removal of trees) of Dowsborough Hillfort and Ruborough Camp.

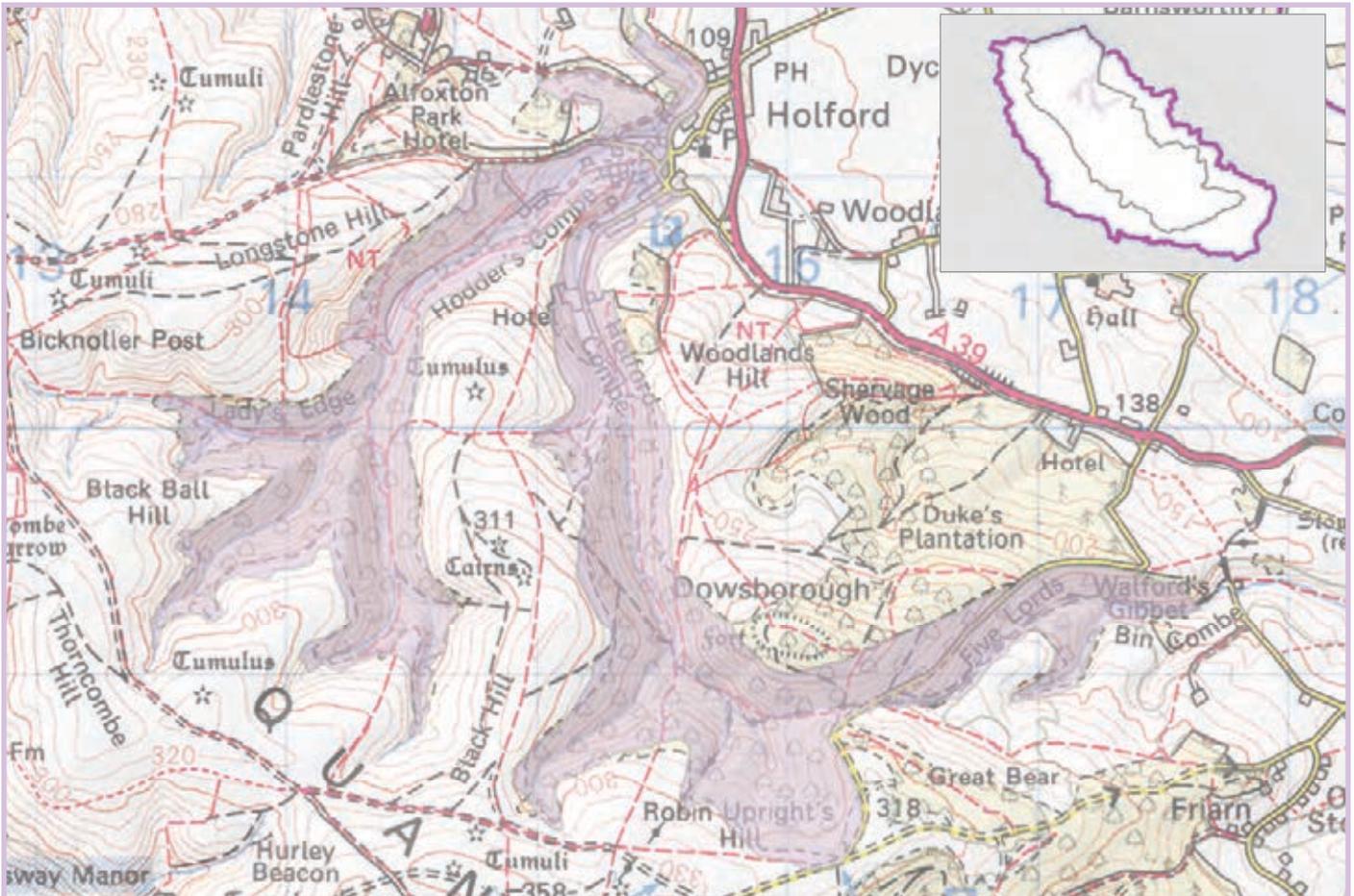
- Condition of and access to landscape features that are important visual clues to historic use of the forests e.g. where they formed part of wider estate landscapes – beech hedgebanks, veteran trees, parkland fencing etc.
  - Inconsistent results of clear felling to create open space through heathland regeneration.
  - Areas of sessile oak woodland require management to ensure variety of age (to prevent wholesale loss in the future) and to improve the biodiversity of the woodland floor.
- are a great location to absorb visitor pressure away from more sensitive sites.
  - The practice of clear felling will continue to have landscape and visual impacts within the AONB – often affecting the character of views from considerable distance. This threat is heightened through an increase in tree disease such as *Phytophthora ramorum* leading to clear fell areas in addition to those planned for timber crop.
  - Set against the sudden landscape change that clear fell imposes, the resultant open, scrubby regenerating areas are an important habitat for species like nightjar and long-eared owl which do not colonise thinned or continuous cover forestry plantations in the same way. Targeted clear fell is therefore likely to have an important, continuing nature conservation role.

## Landscape Vision and Future Management

The vision is for the **Forested Hills and Combes** to continue to become better visually assimilated into the wider Quantock landscape - having a more varied woodland species composition and improved integration with the surrounding open heathland and farmland. The forests will continue to provide an important focus for recreation, taking the pressure away from the sensitive heathland landscapes whilst ensuring people presence is not as the expense of wildlife and condition of the physical landscape. The broadleaf component of these forested areas will be actively managed.

Future management of the **Forested Hills and Combes** should seek opportunities for low impact recreation within the context of the commercial forest. It should strive for management that successfully balances timber production and other uses/benefits. The aim should be to increase biodiversity value, improve

visual integration of the forest with the wider landscape, strengthen diversity of the forest species composition and explore future opportunities for the creation and management of open space such that it is better connected with the surrounding heathland. There is a recognised need to enhance the condition of culturally significant landscape features such as the nationally important Scheduled Monuments.



## Key Characteristics

- A landscape characterised by a **series of small, deep, narrow combes** that together form two valley systems.
- Occurring at a **height of between 300m AOD** (where the tops of the combes drop away from the open heath) and descending **to approximately 140m at Holford**.
- Steep valley sides cloaked in woodland, **dominated by overgrown coppice of Sessile oak** and bounded by wood banks.
- Defined by sedimentary **sandstone of the Devonian period** (Hangman Sandstone Formation) with superficial fluvial deposits of clay, silt, sand and gravel.
- A landscape of **significant nature conservation value** – forming part of The Quantocks SSSI and Exmoor and Quantock Oakwood SAC.
- A **secret, hidden, enclosed landscape** in contrast to the adjacent open heath.
- The **twisted, sculpted forms of the Sessile oak** characterise this ancient wooded landscape.
- From the Heathland Hills and Combes landscape type, **the combes appear as visibly striking green fingers** pushing through the smooth summits of the heath.
- **Small streams** tumbling through the combes provide a moist environment teaming with **ferns, mosses and sedges with lichen** thriving on the ancient woodland.
- Grazed by deer and Commoners' stock (predominantly sheep) creating **wood-pasture character in parts**.
- **A popular area for recreation** – horse riders, walkers, mountain bikers making the most of the rights of way and paths cutting across the valley sides.
- **Industrial heritage** due to tanning, charcoal, silk and woollen industries.
- Cultural value due to **associations with the Romantic poets**.



## 16. Wooded Combes

*"In the night the hill-ponies clatter down the lane past the cottages and when Butterfly Combe is very quiet the solitary walker may surprise two or three of them drinking at the pool where the moorhen and absurd dabchicks paddle the water into rings. Pools and streams make this combe so damp that the blue forget-me-nots, pimpernel, and marsh flowers overspread its floor. A sunny spring afternoon may lure the adder from its winter hiding-place to curl on top of a warm stone by the pool. Higher up the combe birch and willow glimmer whitely against the sturdy boles of oak and beech and in high summer the rowans deck themselves with pendants of berries that change swiftly from soft gold to brilliant scarlet".*

*Berta Lawrence 1952 Quantock Country.*

### Location and boundaries

- 16.1 The **Wooded Combes** landscape type occurs in just one area of the Quantock Hills. This landscape type comprises a series of small combes, forming two valley systems that carve their way through the northern common area of the Heathland Hills and Combes landscape type and converge at the village of Holford, just off the A39. The boundaries of this landscape type are tightly defined by the valley, or combe, landform and, with that, the associated blanket of woodland contained in the hollows.

### Description

- 16.2 Two separate collections of spring fed streams, that emerge on the northern common, have created a number of small combes that cut through the heathland hills at their north-eastern end. Flowing in a northerly direction these streams converge to create Holford or 'Butterfly' Combe and Hodders Combe (Slaughterhouse Combe, Somerton Combe and Lady's Edge converging to form Hodders Combe and Frog Combe and Lady's Combe merging to form Holford Combe). Separated by the open heathland hills of Higher Hare Knap and Lower Hare Knap, the two combes join at the village of Holford, at which point the enclosed, almost 'secret' landscape of the combes gives way to the more open Agricultural Fringe to Coast in the west and the Lowland Hills to Coast in the east.
- 16.3 Where the combes meet with the heathland, elevation is as high as 300m AOD, dropping to 140m AOD at the bottom of the combes. The underlying geology of Devonian red sandstone is overlain with alluvium clay, silt, sand and gravel (associated with the watercourses). These are sedimentary superficial deposit

formed between 11.8 thousand years ago and the present, during the Quaternary period<sup>59</sup>.

- 16.4 The **Wooded Combes** are dominated by sessile oak woodland (SAC-designated) that merges with the open heath at the head of the smaller combes. The domed crowns, twisted trunks and radiating branches of these moss, fern and lichen-covered, long-lived trees evoke a strong sense of an ancient landscape with an almost other worldly, folklore quality. The trees are varied in their habit due to their being the subject to years of coppicing – the wood traditionally managed for the production of charcoal and the bark used for tanning.
- 16.5 In places, the sessile oak has a relatively open canopy, which allows light through to the woodland floor, creating magnificent displays of colours and textures that are a world away from the character of the adjacent open heathland yet no less inspiring. At the woodland edges the exposed location of the trees is apparent – being gnarled and sculpted by the Atlantic winds. Commoners' rights mean the combes are unenclosed and as such are grazed by deer and stock (predominantly sheep) moving off the open heath into the shelter of the combes; creating a 'wood-pasture' landscape.
- 16.6 The streams that have carved this landscape create a lush environment on the valley floors where there are mosses and ferns and sedges aplenty; flourishing in the moist, shady conditions. The sound of running water is reassuring background sound. The woodlands are of international importance for their diversity of lichens and bryophytes. Alder woodland is dominant alongside the streams and rowan, ash and holly occur between the oaks.
- 16.7 Much of the village of Holford sits on lower lying land just outside of the combes but a number of picturesque sandstone and rendered cottages of typically thatched and clay tiled roofs, as well as the old mill, extend up into Holford and Hodders Combe into Holford Glen where the rivers meet. A number of buildings (including the now Combe House Hotel, with its 25 feet overshot wheel and gearing) are a visual clue to the industrial heritage of Holford Combe. The Combe was home to the tanning industry and was a settling place of Huguenots in the 17th century who established the silk manufacturing industry which was later followed by a woollen mill – the Holford Weavers<sup>60</sup>.
- 16.8 The distinctive property of Alfoxton Park sites just beyond the enclosure of the valleys but its association with the combes is strong, in most part because of its literary association with William and Dorothy Wordsworth – who rented and resided at Alfoxton for a year between the summers of 1797 and 1798. During this time Dorothy began her diaries and William completed some twenty poems<sup>61</sup> - the

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<sup>59</sup> <http://mapapps.bgs.ac.uk/geologyofbritain3d/index.html?>

<sup>60</sup> The Holford Weavers who dye some of their spun wool and fabrics with the soft-hued vegetable dyes yielded by Quantock plants – heather, bracken, the bark of trees, orange lichen. From Berta Lawrence (1952) 'Quantock Country'.

<sup>61</sup> The Landscape of the Quantock Hills (Countryside Agency 2003)

house being their base from which they took their many walks, with Coleridge, across the Quantocks, inspired to write about the landscape they saw.

- 16.9 The combes provided great inspiration for the romantic poetry of Coleridge and both William and Dorothy Wordsworth.

“I heard a thousand blended notes,  
While I in a grove sit reclined,  
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts  
Bring sad thoughts to the mind ...”

*From 'Lines written in Early Spring', William Wordsworth  
composed in Holford Glen*

“Here it was perhaps that Dorothy heard the nightingale with Coleridge one May night. The nightingales still sing there, birds whistle in its beeches, periwinkles trail over its wall ... This “low damp dell”, green with fern, sombre with tree-shadows, filled with the noise of plunging water, was a favourite place of William’s and sister’s”

*Berta Lawrence, 1952, 'Quantock Country'.*

- 16.10 The combes are a haven for walkers, bike and horse riders and wildlife watchers. Many use car parking provision at Holford (Bowling Green) to walk up through the combes – making good use of the many public rights of way that run up and across the streams - to directly access the open heathland. Emerging from the enclosed wooded landscape to the open heath is breath-taking– the intricate and enclosed landscape of the combes dramatically giving way to the vastness of the heathland summits.
- 16.11 This is a landscape of significant conservation value – forming part of the Quantocks SSSI and the Exmoor and Quantock Oak Woods SAC.

Nature Conservation Designations	
Ancient Woodland (Total area)	165.00ha
SAC	Exmoor & Quantock Oakwoods (243.27ha)
SSSI	The Quantocks (296.42ha)

<b>Historic Environment Designations</b>	
Listed Buildings	Grade II (4)
Scheduled Monuments	2

## Evaluation

- 16.12 The **Wooded Combes** feel like a hidden Quantock landscape that for the most part keeps its layers of human interaction with the natural environment, and busy industrial past, a secret. The deep, enclosed topography of the combes, the blanket of sessile oak woodland and its rich ground flora, the views and sounds of running water, and the relationship of the combes with the open heath, settlement character and evidence of industrial heritage and strong associations with the romantic poetry movement all combine to create such a distinctive landscape of strong character both perceptually and culturally and unique to this small corner of the Quantock Hills. It is an intricate and intimate place of great visual diversity, significant wildlife value, industrial and cultural heritage and recreational opportunities and artistic inspiration for the contemporary lover of landscape.
- 16.13 The **Wooded Combes** landscape is perceived to be in **moderate** condition overall.

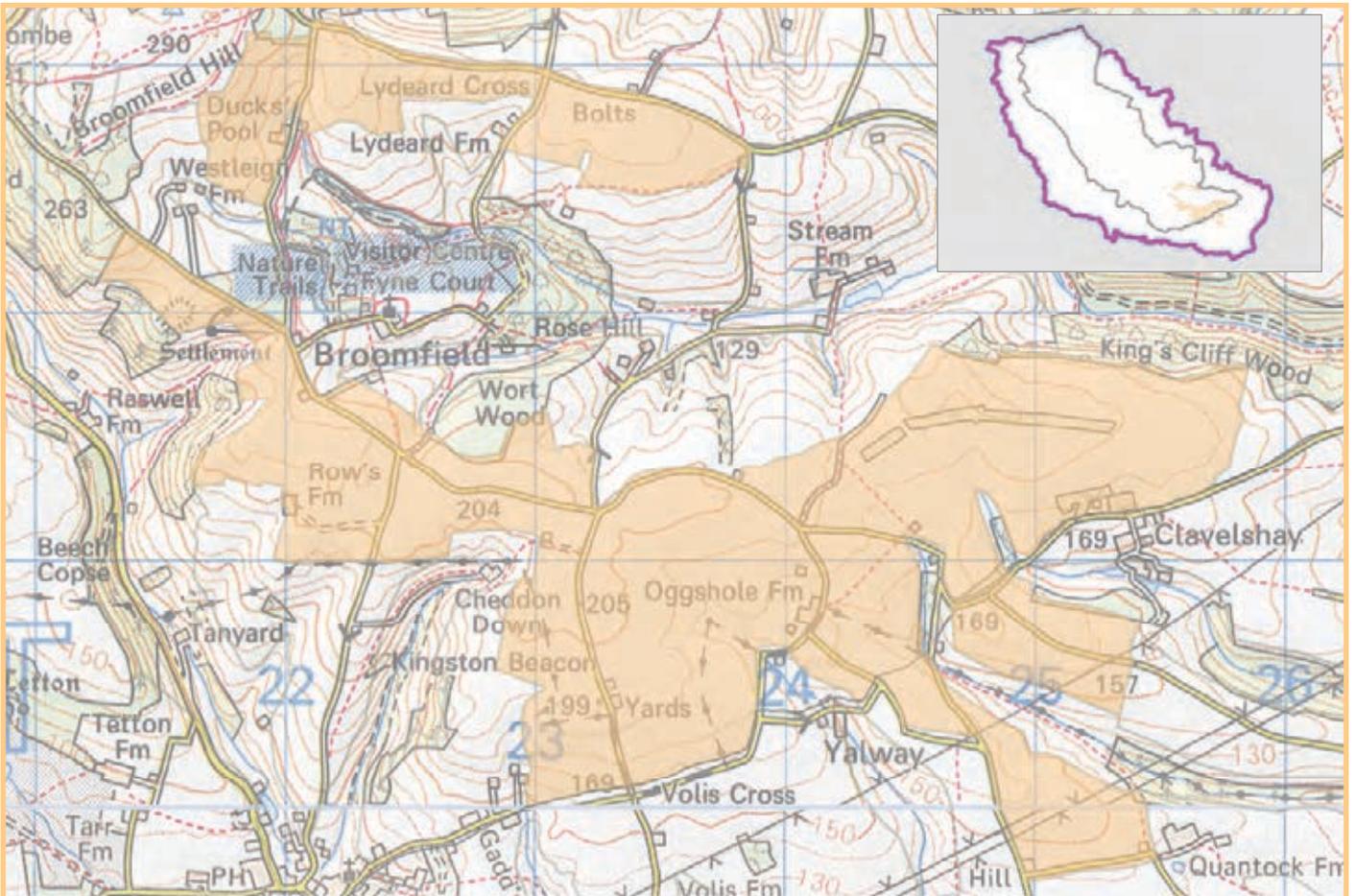
### Issues and Opportunities

- The even age of many of the former coppice stands make the woodland vulnerable to wind throw, disease and widespread loss.
- Inconsistent approaches to woodland management – some overgrazing and a dense canopy in places - is resulting in a lack of woodland regeneration and a much poorer lichen and bryophyte flora than in more open parts of the woodland.
- The condition of the SSSI woodlands is recorded as being 'unfavourable recovering' by Natural England.
- Establishment of woodland management initiatives/projects (or existing funding streams) to promote good woodland management.
- The combes' Common Land status makes fencing off areas very difficult. Protecting coppice regrowth or new saplings from browsing deer and livestock will therefore require creative solutions.
- Opportunities for interpretation of industrial heritage and associated historic woodland management e.g. through educational initiatives and walks as opposed to interpretative

- Vulnerability of the physical landscape to the impacts of recreation (horses, bikes, walkers, off-road vehicle use) along the network of rights of way through the combes.
- Woodland is extending further onto the heathland, blurring the boundaries between 'open' hills and 'enclosed' combes. Future management may favour natural succession in which case treatment of the woodland/heathland transition should be sensitive to landscape character and biodiversity.
- material placed in the landscape.
- Monitoring recreation levels and undertaking associated condition surveys to inform management.
- Loss of historic industrial buildings and/or pressure for redevelopment of historic industrial buildings within Holford Glen.
- Increased recreation in the combes may also affect tranquillity.

## Landscape Vision and Future Management

The vision for the **Wooded Combes** is to conserve the small-scale, intimate and ancient character of the combes where the condition of the ex-coppice sessile oak woodland is enhanced by a consistent, sensitive woodland management approach that will bring variation in age to prevent large scale future loss. The woodland will continue to provide shelter for grazing deer and sheep coming in off the Common. Future development within the combes will be minimal and any new development will respond the clear pattern of buildings that nestle well into the shelter of the combes. Surviving features of the industrial past will be conserved. The landscape will provide low-level, informal recreation that does not detract from the tranquillity of the combes nor threaten their significant biodiversity value. The almost hidden or secret quality of the **Wooded Combes** will endure and they will continue to delight by their striking contrast with the large expanses of the adjacent heath.



## Key Characteristics

- Elevated **hilltops and undulating plateau landform** typically occurring around the 200m AOD mark (reaching as high as 228m AOD and as low as 165m AOD).
- Underlying **geology of slate with sandstone** (Morte Slates Formation) of the Devonian period.
- Farmed landscape characterised almost exclusively by **arable production**.
- **Large geometric fields** whose boundaries are typically defined by **short flailed and/or gappy native hedgerows** with very few hedgerow trees.
- An **exposed and open** landscape evoking a sense of large scale.
- A simple landscape with **few focal points or distinctive features**.
- **Largely unsettled** – farms typically occurring within the more sheltered landscape of the adjacent rolling farmland.
- Some **extensive views** from the plateau edges.

# Arable Plateaux



# 17. Arable Plateaux

## Location and boundaries

- 17.1 The **Arable Plateaux** landscape type occurs in the southeast of the QLPS area and represents the higher areas of land that rise above, and are markedly distinct from, the *Farmed Hills with Settled Combes*. The hilltop and plateaux landform has a simple character; being more open and consistently arable in its land use compared with the smaller scale, undulating landscape of the *Farmed Hills with Settled Combes*. The larger, geometric fields of the plateaux, under arable cultivation, have created a landscape much characterised by intensive farming practice.
- 17.2 There are two small areas belonging to the **Arable Plateaux** landscape type. Occurring very close to each other (to the north and south of the village of Broomfield) they are separated by a valley and ridge. They are not of sufficient size or geographical separation to warrant individual descriptions. It should be noted that at the time of mapping, conversion of pasture to intensive arable farming suggests that this landscape type will grow quickly as the expansion of arable cropping will lead to the loss/decline of landscape features and patterns (namely hedgerows and hedgerow trees) and thus change landscape character overall.

## Description

- 17.3 This Landscape Character Type occurs within the southeast of the study area and represents the higher areas of landscape that rise out of, and above, the *Rolling Hills with Settled Combes*. The two areas of the **Arable Plateaux** are separated from the aforementioned landscape due to their distinct ridge and plateau landform and by the consistent arable land use. Although not dramatic, there is a notable change in landscape character from the complex landform of rolling hills and enclosed valleys to the simple, elevated, undulating open plateaux.
- 17.4 The plateaux landscape is underlain by a geology of slate with sandstone (Morte Slate formation) – sedimentary bedrock formed during the Upper Devonian period. This gives rise to the free draining loamy soils that facilitate the dominance of arable cropping.
- 17.5 The historic operation of grubbing up hedges is no better illustrated than here on the plateaux where old hedgerows were removed to make way for modern intensive farming practices. Some old tree standards remain, marking the line of historic field boundaries but these long-gone field divisions are for the most part unidentifiable. The large fields of the plateau are bounded by native hedgerows that, due to there being no requirement for stock proofing, have in places been flailed so short as to provide little definition to the field edge. In many places the hedgerows fail to exist

– with large gappy sections a repeating occurrence. Hedgerow trees are noticeably few and the lack of tree cover makes for a perceptually more uniform, emptier landscape with few distinctive features compared with its surroundings. The operation of large agricultural machinery has meant that traditionally smaller field entrances have been significantly widened and traditional wooden gates replaced with metal.

- 17.6 Viewing experiences on the Plateaux vary. Within the plateaux views are largely contained to the plateaux itself whilst at the edge of the landscape, views are far reaching over the lower-lying hills and combes and beyond – taking in a wide variety of landscape scene both inland and coastal.
- 17.7 Settlement is very limited, comprising a few farms with conversion of some of their associated agricultural buildings into residential properties.
- 17.8 In places, the lanes running through the landscape act as busy rat runs at particular times of the day – Volis Hill for example which cuts down to the suburban edge of Taunton, where wide grass verges align the lane, have allowed for verges to be damaged and informal passing places to establish.

Nature Conservation Designations	
Ancient Woodland (Total area)	0.19ha

## Evaluation

- 17.9 This is a landscape of **moderate character**. The landform and elevation (and the views enjoyed as a result) are distinctive features of this landscape type – the elevation allowing for impressive views of a surrounding landscape scene that imparts its character back to the plateaux. However, intensive farming practices and the general absence of distinctive landscape features and elements (such as hedgerow and hedgerow trees) dilutes the landscape pattern because of the **poor state of repair**, thereby reducing the quality and strength of character overall.

## Issues and Opportunities

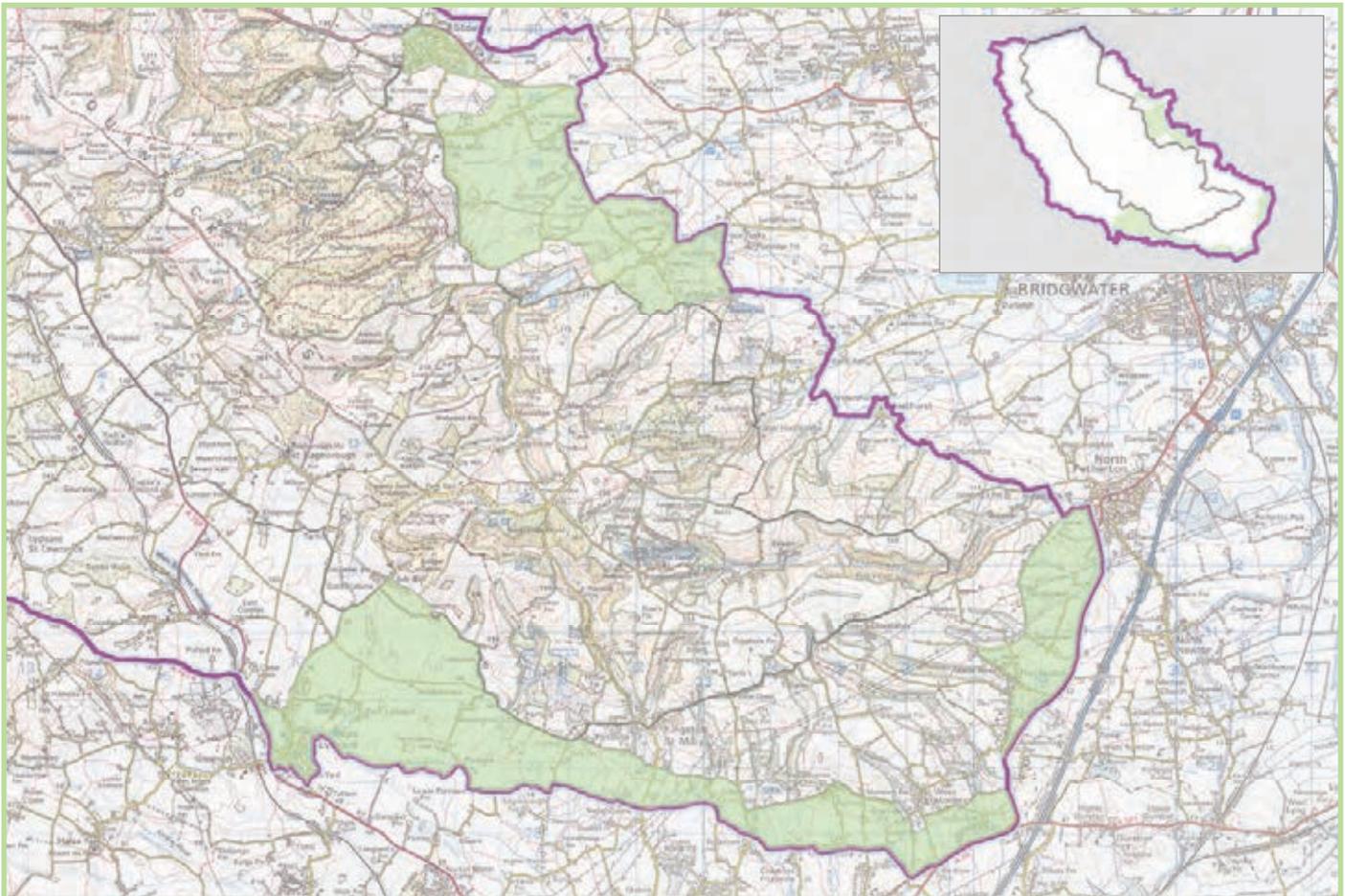
- Intensive farming practices for arable production has reduced diversity and texture in the landscape; creating a visually poor countryside compared with other areas of the AONB. These practices are spilling over into the adjacent landscape of the *Rolling Farmland and Settled Combes*.
- Potential pressures for more agricultural buildings which if poorly sited would be visually jarring in this open and exposed landscape.
- Potential pressure for tall structures on the plateaux (such as communication masts and turbines) that could break the

- Deterioration of the landscape pattern through over-flailing and, in places, historic loss of hedgerow boundaries, widening of field entrances and general lack of hedgerow and in-field trees.
  - Traffic pressures along Volis Hill - acting as a rat run for traffic cutting up/down over the hills resulting in damage to the wide roadside grass verges and the development of informal passing places.
  - Anti-social behaviour - fly tipping and littering is a common occurrence on Volis Hill.
- open ridge.
  - Future conversion of isolated agricultural buildings to residential properties; domesticating a typically unsettled landscape.
  - Soil erosion and surface run-off – exacerbating flash flooding on lower areas after periods of relative drought.
- Potential for in-field solar farms resulting in landscape and visual impacts and change to landscape character.

### **Landscape Vision and Future Management**

When looking at the AONB as a whole, this landscape type is judged to be fairing worst in terms of landscape quality and there is a need to work with landowners towards landscape enhancement overall - to focus on restoring the landscape features, most obviously through improving the structure, condition and future management of hedgerows (and hedgerow trees) that will strengthen the pattern and visual integrity of the landscape.

The vision is of a viable but less intensively farmed, ecologically richer landscape that is sensitively managed with fields divided by a strong network of mixed native hedgerows and mature hedgerow trees.



## Key Characteristics

- Large area of **gently undulating hills** occurring below 100m AOD.
- Farmed landscape – a mix of **pasture and arable cultivation**.
- Fields bounded predominantly by **native hedgerows managed through flailing**.
- Underlain by **geology of mudstone and conglomerate** (Mercia Mudstone Group) and **sandstone** (Helsby Sandstone Formation) **of the Triassic period**.
- **Drainage ditches align the lanes** across the area.
- **Views** across mixed farmed to **urban centres**.
- **Drained by streams and brooks that rise in the hills** of the Quantocks and carve their course towards the Rivers Parrett and Tone.
- Some **surviving orchards**.
- **Remnant parkland** of historic 18th century estates.
- **Main transport routes and pylons tracts** affect levels of tranquillity and quality of views.



# 18. Agricultural Foothills

## Location and boundaries

- 18.1 The **Agricultural Foothills** are exclusive to the area outside of the AONB boundary – abutting the designated landscape of the Quantock Hills but not crossing into it. The **Agricultural Foothills** occurs in three areas within the QLPS area (separated by the *Rolling Farmland and Wooded Combes* where this landscape extends up to the study area boundary) but in reality this landscape forms a continuous arc that wraps around, and forms the immediate setting to, almost half of the AONB - from the edge of Nether Stowey on the north side of the hills to Bishops Lydeard in the south. The **Agricultural Foothills** extend both north, east and south beyond the study area where they merge with the lower lying areas and river floodplain of the Vale of Taunton Deane and with the landscape of the levels and moors at Bridgwater.

## Description

- 18.2 The agricultural foothills form a large area of low, gently undulating hills where streams have carved shallow depressions. Occurring at an elevation of less than 100m AOD, this is very much a transitional landscape type that separates the pronounced and rolling hills (*Rolling Hills and Settled Combes*) from the vale landscapes that surround Bridgwater to the north and Taunton to the south.
- 18.3 This is a farmed landscape – the fields patterns reflecting medieval or earlier enclosure but with numerous fields having changed shape and been enlarged due to historic hedgerow removal. Ash and oak typify the hedgerow trees with some areas feeling well-treed but more typically many hedgerow sections contain very few or no hedgerow trees at all. Hedgerows are managed predominantly through flailing and they are often gappy, very short flailed or non-existent so there is a sense of loss of texture, structure and features in the landscape. This was a landscape that historically contained many Elm trees before Dutch Elm Disease and regrowth of elms in the hedges is apparent. Deciduous woodland copses are a repeating feature.
- 18.4 The underlying geology of mudstone and conglomerate (Mercia Mudstone Group) of the Triassic period, giving rise to slightly acidic loamy and clayey soils with impeded drainage. Areas of sandstone (Helsby Sandstone Formation) occur between West Monkton and North Petherton as well as west of Cheddon Fitzpaine and west of Kingston St Mary.

- 18.5 The farmland is drained (drainage ditches aligning the network of lanes) and as such this landscape is vulnerable to pollution run off and rapid through flow to streams<sup>62</sup>. In views from the hills, the foothills are a combination of mixed farmland, with rich red soils where cultivated, and small deciduous woodlands. Growth of miscanthus (elephant grass) is common, more so in the south around Fennington. Here for much of the year, once open views are now crowded out by this fast growing, tall crop. Fields are often divided by post and wire and post and rail fencing (or tape) to create horse paddocks – as is evident for example around Cheddon Fitzpaine.
- 18.6 Scattered hamlets and farmsteads occur across the landscape and the presence of red sandstone is reflected in its consistent use as a building stone. Large modern agricultural buildings are often incongruous and conversion of traditional barns to residential is common. Where the landscape becomes closer to the urban edge of Taunton, suburban style housing begins to become the dominant character of settlements. This is a landscape that varies from overtly rural to urban fringe in character. Rural lanes are frequently used as rat runs to avoid congestion in urban areas.
- 18.7 In the northern area, between Spaxton and Nether Stowey there is a strong connection with the *Forested Hills and Combes* landscape of Great Wood – the distinctive dark green of the coniferous plantation forming, as it does, a strong backdrop in views. In the south the transition from the adjacent hills and combes is subtle but there is a notable sense of tree cover reducing and a greater connection with the lower lying landscape; views opening out across the Vale of Taunton Deane to the Blackdown Hills AONB.
- 18.8 This is a landscape that was once characterised by orchards. Now, only a few remain, there being a concentration just west of the A38 near to Thurloxtton. Here, ‘pick your own’ farms are a feature of the landscape and crops grown under polytunnels cover a significant area of land just south of North Petherton.
- 18.9 In the south, the landscape is greatly influenced by the A38 which marks a definitive shift from rural landscape to one greatly influenced by transport corridors and infrastructure – the M5 located a short distance to the east (outside of the study area) and apparent in views as well as a constant source of noise (with the A38) significantly reducing tranquillity. Pylons lines cut across the landscape in places and have a significant effect on the quality of views.
- 18.10 Designed landscapes of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century occur within and on the edge of the Foothills but these are often remnant and landscapes under divided ownership such as the parkland at Walford Cross – severed by the A38 and largely lost to farmland - and Sandhill Park (just outside the study area) which is the location of a suburban housing estate.

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<sup>62</sup> Untied Kingdom Soil Observatory <http://www.landis.org.uk/services/soilsguide/soilscapes.cfm?ssid=8>

<b>Nature Conservation Designations</b>	
Ancient Woodland (Total area)	0.17ha
<b>Historic Environment Designations</b>	
Listed Buildings	Grade I (4)
	Grade II* (6)
	Grade II (86)
Registered Park and Gardens	Hestercombe (Grade I)
Scheduled Monuments	4

## Evaluation

18.11 This is a landscape of **moderate** character. There has been significant loss of key features such as hedgerow trees and orchards and the management (flailing) of surviving hedgerows has seen their decline such that the structure of the landscape pattern has significantly weakened. Whilst much of the landscape retains its rural character, urban fringe and infrastructure impart their influence on the foothills with main road corridors and features such a pylon tracts affecting levels of tranquillity and quality of views. The overall visible condition of the landscape is judged to be **moderate to poor** overall.

## Issues and Opportunities

- Gappy and denuded hedges due to flailing.
- Loss of trees in the landscape, particularly hedgerow trees and historic orchards.
- Levels of flooding has increased in recent years and is likely to increase exponentially with climate change and increased arable cultivation on the hills above.
- Vulnerability to pollution run through to watercourses.
- Urban Fringe pressures – transport and housing.
- Decline and loss of historic
- Damage to roads and hedges due to traffic levels through the rural lanes.
- Insensitive highways treatment to rural roads – signage, kerbing and lighting affecting the degree of rurality.
- Large-scale growth of miscanthus – affecting the landscape by restricting views (and the sense of connection to the hills and vale).
- Insensitive division of fields and paraphernalia in the landscape associated with horsiculture.
- Incongruous large-scale

parkland landscapes such as at Walford House.

agricultural buildings.

- Expansion of polytunnels (around North Petherton) in recent years affecting quality of views.

### **Landscape Character Vision and Future Management**

The vision is for a landscape whose structure and sense of intactness is enhanced through for example increasing the number of hedgerow trees, replanting orchards and encouraging hedge laying as opposed to flailing. This will increase both the strength of character and condition of the foothills, thereby improving the quality of the landscape overall. There is a need to focus on the interface of the suburban areas and transport corridors with the rural landscape.

## 19. Forces for change

- 19.1 Landscapes are always evolving, reflecting the dynamic nature of the environment – both natural and human-made. There are many *forces for change* affecting the quality and condition of all landscapes. For the Quantock Hills AONB Service the statutory duty to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the landscape is a huge challenge in the face of modern social, economic and environmental pressures that are being brought to bear on the fabric of this very special, nationally-important landscape. Similarly, pressures affecting the undesignated setting or immediate hinterland of the protected landscape can be equally damaging to its special qualities and overall character – often directly affecting the quality of views and indeed one’s perception and experience moving to and from the designated landscape.
- 19.2 The Quantock Hills AONB Management Plan (2019-2024), which is a material consideration in the planning process, recognises these pressures. Key headings, and an associated summary of information from the Management Plan (with additional supporting information) is provided below.

### **New development**

- 19.3 Within the Quantocks itself and its setting, new development can *‘easily change the character and beauty of the area’*<sup>63</sup>. The Management Plan recognises the issue of small, cumulative development, which although seemingly minor, can and does over time, gradually erode the key characteristics of a landscape; weakening the landscape pattern. The AONB Service sees cumulative changes as a significant element of overall change within the Quantock Hills and surrounding area.
- 19.4 Prominent features such as communication masts or a building in a visually sensitive location can bring instantaneous and sometimes dramatic change to the landscape; significantly altering character and the quality of views.
- 19.5 Taunton and Bridgwater are two of Somerset’s largest towns and their relatively rapid expansion is felt, in both views and activity on the hills (their populations using the hills for recreation as well as a cut through to avoid urban traffic congestion). Similarly, the two new nuclear reactors at Hinkley Point C are changing visual amenity from, and towards, the hills, both during the day and at night (due to a significant increase in light levels for night time construction works). This major infrastructure project is also increasing traffic levels and congestion on rural lanes.

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<sup>63</sup> Quantock Hills AONB Draft Management Plan (2019-2024)

## Leaving the European Union

- 19.6 The Management Plan recognises the potential effects to the landscape of the Quantock Hills with a departure from the European Union, but also the opportunities it might bring. It states that:

*Economic and policy shifts in farming and forestry continue to drive change in the Quantock landscape, and leaving the European Union will potentially change every aspect from produce markets to agri-environment schemes. The Common Agricultural Policy has never seriously focussed on environmental gain and there is significant potential for real benefit in this area. Much of the UK's environmental regulation and statutory protection is also bound-up in EU legislation and in this respect the effect of Brexit in the medium and longer term is unpredictable*

*Protecting the landscape character of the Quantocks within the ever-changing pressures on farming and the rural economy is a challenge however opportunities to improve wildlife and landscape (natural capital) conservation and encourage public understanding of the countryside continue to evolve.*

*Quantock Hills AONB Management Plan (2019-2024)*

## Recreation and access

- 19.7 A significant objective of the Management Plan is the public enjoyment of the Quantock Hills. It recognises the physical and mental health and wellbeing benefits of the protected landscape and the importance of connecting people, place and the local economy. The challenge is managing levels of access and use to try to minimise the effect on the landscape's natural capital and key experiential qualities such as views and levels of tranquillity or even a sense of remoteness in the more exposed upland heath landscapes. Levels of human activity can also bring challenges for the landscape's biodiversity.

## Climate change

- 19.8 The Management Plan states that, "*Landscape, biodiversity, historic landscape condition, recreational use and farming practices will all be affected*" by a changing global climate. It notes the challenge of balancing the needs, for example, of renewable energy whilst conserving and enhancing the landscape. Pressure for in-field solar farms has increased in over the last decade and at the time of writing there are plans for a large solar farm between the Quantock Hills and Exmoor National Park.

## *Other challenges*

- 19.9 Other challenges that continue to affect the landscape of the Quantock Hills and its setting are:

### **Agriculture and Land Management**

- 19.10 Issues include improvement of previously species-rich grassland and loss of permanent pasture and the historic loss of hedgerow boundaries, which has enlarged fields and weakened the enclosure pattern (particularly evident because of the rolling landform and therefore visible nature of the agricultural landscape). Similar changes in the foothills and vale landscapes below the prominent hills are also apparent, affecting the setting to the protected landscape. Management of hedgerows is predominantly through flailing, creating short and tight hedgerows that are gappy and in many cases lacking hedgerow trees. Conversion of pasture to arable cropping in areas that were historically grazed is continuing to change the character of the higher, steeper slopes of the rolling farmland. In the period 2000-2009, there was an increase in cereal cropping by 82 percent<sup>64</sup>. Over the last ten years or so, *Miscanthus* crops have become a familiar sight both inside the designated landscape and within its setting – particularly on the arable plateaux and within the Vale of Taunton Deane.
- 19.11 A more intensive approach to livestock rearing has also seen an increase in the demand for large agricultural buildings that are at odds with the scale of more traditional buildings and their siting pattern, and are often incongruous in views.
- 19.12 There has been a reduction in dairy herds, which in turn has led to a fragmentation of holdings. An increase in horse keeping is evident with fields divided into paddocks and small-scale incremental development occurring to facilitate this activity e.g. field shelters, stables and yards and the often associated poaching of the ground.

### **Managing the heathland**

- 19.13 *The Quantock heathland is managed through a combination of grazing (Commoner's stock) and controlled burning or swaling.* Management of heathland into the future will need to respond to factors such as:
- climatic conditions (drier summers increasing the likelihood of damaging uncontrolled summer heathland fires is a concern);
  - an increase in the rate of natural regeneration of scrub and woodland due to lower grazing pressure;

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<sup>64</sup> NCA 144 Profile: Quantock Hills, Natural England 2013

- changing agricultural practices i.e. the viability of hill farming into the future (with all the uncertainty that Brexit and changing agri-environment schemes bring); and
- the discussion around re-naturalisation (or re-wilding) of the heathland for woodlands to re-establish on the hills.

## **Beech hedge banks**

19.14 Beech hedge banks are such an iconic feature of the Quantock landscape and their contribution to the character of the place is marked. The hedges were mostly planted in the nineteenth century to mark field boundaries although some are older – marking more ancient boundaries where the banks may also be stone-faced<sup>65</sup>. They are however under great threat due largely to the characteristic trend within the Quantock Hills to allow the rows of trees to grow to maturity. This makes the trees prone to wind blow leading to limb loss, and being uprooted. This can cause associated damage to the stone-faced banks – seeing decline of the whole boundary. In the longer term, by the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, stresses created by the changing climate, particularly drier, hotter summers, may mean that beech will no longer be able to survive in exposed upland hedge banks.

*Landowners and countryside managers face a dilemma. Should they accept these features as redundant elements of a passing historic phase and allow them to lapse, at least as functional boundaries or should they take steps to reverse the decline and restore the hedgebanks, for all that this amounts to a substantial practical undertaking? One response is that while some boundaries may indeed be beyond the pale, others merit at least partial if not wholesale restoration...*

*Quantock Hills information leaflet – Managing the Beech Hedge Banks in the Quantock landscape*

19.15 The current AONB Management Plan recognises that “many important beech hedge banks in the Quantocks have been brought back into management through environmental stewardship and AONB grants in the last ten years” but that there remain a number of examples that have matured to excessive stature. There is a need to ensure hedgebanks are managed so that trees are varied in age and size and are not lost, wholesale, to the landscape, which would be a devastating loss of an enduring landscape legacy.

<sup>65</sup> Quantock Hills information leaflet – Managing the Beech Hedge Banks in the Quantock landscape - [https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/11909d\\_12ba33ba0b884af98271c8f3dcf4b393.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/11909d_12ba33ba0b884af98271c8f3dcf4b393.pdf)

## Woodland and Forestry

- 19.16 Approximately one quarter of the total area of the AONB (2652 ha) is covered by woodland (broadleaved, coniferous and mixed) with 1455 ha being actively managed and 1213ha currently unmanaged<sup>66</sup>. Loss of traditional woodland management techniques such as the coppicing of sessile oak has led to a lack of age diversity and a limited light reaching the woodland floor, adversely affecting flora and fauna and inhibiting natural regeneration. The current AONB Management Plan states that “there is some support for restarting limited areas of coppice management in these woods which could enhance the biodiversity interest, diversify age-structure and deliver some socio-economic benefits through public engagement and employment.
- 19.17 More sensitive management approaches to areas of commercial forestry have seen some of the geometric lines of coniferous woodland replaced with a softer broadleaf mix – moderating plantation edges; helping them better assimilate into the rounded hills and folds of the Quantocks.
- 19.18 Tree pests and diseases are a real threat to the Quantock Landscape – *Chalara fraxinea* (ash dieback) has reached the AONB and there has been some loss of ash but the extent of its effects so far are not as yet known. *Phytophthora ramorum* has affected Larch populations on the hills and is also a threat to Bilberry, Sweet Chestnut and Beech<sup>67</sup>.

## Orchards

- 19.19 Most farms within the Quantock parishes, during the nineteenth century, had their own orchards to produce cider. The tithe maps show that many cottage gardens were given over to fruit trees so villages, as well as farms, were engaged in cider production.<sup>68</sup> Various social and economic changes have led to the decline of orchards within the Quantock landscape and this previously productive feature of the landscape had already begun to decline by 1946 and continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century; their grubbing and replacement with more financially viable uses incentivised by government funding until 1988. Although removal of funding reduced the rate of decline, it did not stop the loss of orchards nationally, and this national trend is also reflected in the Quantock parishes, as Dr Marianna Dudley wrote in her post-doctoral research study:

*A decline in cider consumption and the loss of small cider businesses to large operations has initiated the decline of orchards in the first half of the twentieth century. But the intensification of agriculture in the second half hastened the*

<sup>66</sup> Source: Quantock Hills AONB Management Plan 2019-2024.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Dr Marianna Dudley: Fallen Fruit: Mapping Orchard Decline in the Quantock Hills AONB, 2015

*process, resulting in national losses with significant local impacts. The tradition of an orchard attached to each farm in the area has been lost.*

*In line with national orchard trends, orchards in the Quantock Hills have declined steadily through the twentieth century. But they have not disappeared from the Quantock Hills altogether, and the replanting of orchards in the area would reintroduce habitats, practices and places that have traditionally been a key ingredient of Quantock life.*

*Fallen Fruit: Mapping Orchard Decline in the Quantock Hills AONB, 2015*

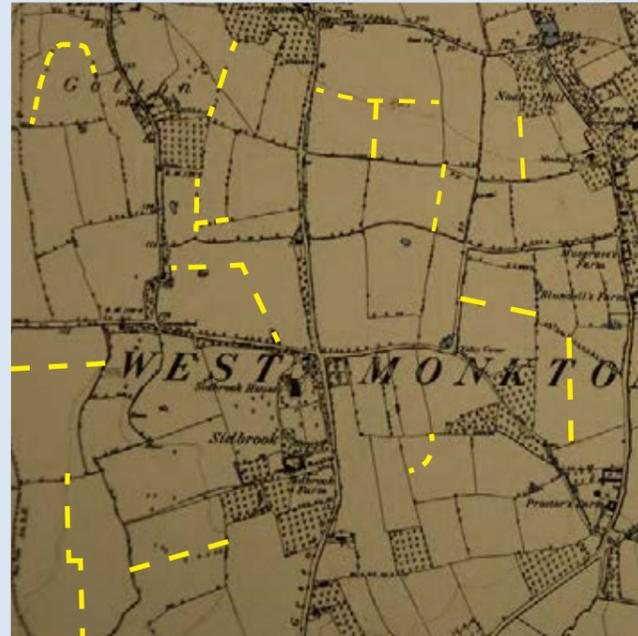
## **Loss of landscape fabric**

19.20 **Figure 19.1** provides a desk-based analysis of a sample area from the **Rolling Farmland with Settled Combes** landscape type (around the hamlet of Gotton within the parish of West Monkton). Detailed examination of this area illustrates the trend for orchards lost, hedgerow trees no longer surviving, and lengths of hedgerow sections removed. It provides an immediate indication as to the number of landscape features that have disappeared from this part of the QLPS area between the Tithe map of 1839, through to the First Edition OS map of 1889 and then to the present day (aerial photograph). More detailed study could examine these trends across the whole of QLPS area and would give a comprehensive picture of incremental loss of landscape fabric over the last 200 years and perhaps offer a focus for community-based landscape restoration and biodiversity enhancement projects across the hills.

## **Considering the bigger picture**

- 19.21 There is a difficult balance to be struck when considering changes to landscape character in the relatively near future. Whilst there is a desire to ensure the intrinsic character of a place is conserved (or enhanced or restored, depending on its condition), some pressures facing the landscape may be so persistent and robust that there is a need to recognise that the traditional approaches to 'conservation of character' may not prove to be the best management approach moving forward – being perhaps too unsustainable, too resource heavy or economically unsound such that they cannot continue to be viable.
- 19.22 There should always be a need to ensure that change brings benefit to the landscape, as opposed to causing harm to inherent character and special qualities. The growing recognition of Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services as a focus for multiple environmental, social and economic benefits forms a large part of the discussion around future attitudes to landscape and indeed how this might affect approaches to policy and management approaches in the future.

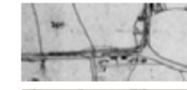
## Hedges



## Orchards



Figure 19.1: Loss of landscape fabric



Tithe map, 1839  
© TheGenealogist © Crown copyright Images reproduced  
courtesy of The National Archives, London, England



6 inch 1st edition map, 1886  
Courtesy of The British Library Board



Aerial photograph, 2017  
Courtesy of Somerset County Council

- Orchards identified in the landscape
- ⊙ Orchards identified as lost, 2017
- - Hedgerows identified as lost, 1886
- - Hedgerows identified as lost, 2017
- Individual hedgerow trees present, 1886
- Individual hedgerow trees surviving in 2017

All information based on desk based analysis

## Hedgerow trees



**Ecosystem services** are benefit flows to humans for natural ecosystems.

**Natural capital** is the stock of natural ecosystems from which these benefits flow. Mismanagement of natural capital assets or unsustainable use of a service ultimately has negative impacts on benefits obtained ... Understanding the benefits obtained from natural capital; the assets that underpin them; and how investment, intervention or management might affect these benefits, is needed for long-term planning.<sup>69</sup>

The benefits of Ecosystem Services are broken down into **functional groups**, thus:

- **Provisioning Services** – the products that are obtained from ecosystems such as *food, fibre, fuel, genetic resources*
- **Regulating Services** – benefits obtained from the regulation of ecosystems services – these include *air quality maintenance, climate regulation, water regulation and purification, pollination, protection from extreme weather and climatic events*
- **Cultural Services** – non-physical benefits from ecosystems such as *spiritual enrichment, cognitive development, reflection, recreation and aesthetic experiences*.
- **Supporting Services** – those necessary for production of all other ecosystem services whose impact on humans is indirect or occurring over a long period. Examples include *production of atmospheric oxygen (through photosynthesis), soil formation and retention, nutrient cycling, water cycling and provisioning of habitat*.<sup>70</sup>

19.23 There is therefore a need for a bigger, wider discourse around what the landscape might look like in years to come if natural processes (such as re-naturalisation of the iconic Quantock heathland landscape as discussed above) were to become a necessary reality. If, for example, areas of the heathland were allowed to re-naturalise to scrub and woodland, there would indeed be a change to natural capital and some ecosystem services losses e.g. loss of open spaces skylines and vistas (**cultural services**). There may, however, have to be an acceptance of some compromises if, on balance, the benefits outweigh the disbenefits e.g. re-naturalisation may help reduce flooding on lower ground due to less surface water

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/natural-capital-and-ecosystem-service-approaches-to-management> as viewed 11/02/2019

<sup>70</sup> Information on functional groups taken from Joint Nature Conservation Committee via <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/default.aspx?page=6382> as views on 11/02/2019

run-off (**regulation services**) and/or create opportunities for sustainable woodland management and timber cropping (**provisioning services**).

19.24 Discussions and debates as to the pros and cons of a sea change in landscape management approach will be complex, and no doubt controversial, but it is timely and even perhaps overdue.

## 20. References

### Publications

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- Tudor, Christine. 2014. *An approach to Landscape Character Assessment*. Natural England.
- W Wordsworth and S T Coleridge. 1798. *Lyrical Ballads*.

### Leaflets

- '*Geology and Fossils of the Quantock Hills and Coast*'. Quantock Hills AONB Service and Geckoella – consultants for ecology and geology.
- '*Heathland Birds of the Quantock Hills*'. Quantock Hills AONB Service, RSPB, The National Trust and Somerset Ornithological Society.
- '*Managing the Beech Hedge Banks in the Quantock landscape*'.
- '*Recording and Understanding the Historic Landscape of the Quantock Hills*'. Quantock Hills AONB Service and English Heritage

## **Key Websites**

British Geological Society website - <https://www.bgs.ac.uk>

Cranfield University 2018. The Soils Guide - <http://www.landis.org.uk>

Historic England website - <https://historicengland.org.uk>

Joint Nature Conservation Committee – <https://www.defra.gov.uk>

Quantock Hills AONB - <https://www.quantockhills.com>

National Character Area profiles – <https://www.gov.uk>

Natural England website - <https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk>

The Landscape Institute - <https://www.landscapeinstitute.org>

# Appendix 1

## Future management summary table

## Future management summary table

By combining the strength of character judgements with judgements of landscape condition we can better understand how to focus management approaches for optimum state or quality of the landscape.

As an example, the **Heathland Hills and Combes** landscape type is judged to have a **strong character** and its **condition** is judged to be **moderate to good** overall. This means that two management strategies apply – ‘**Conserve**’ and ‘**Conserve and Enhance**’. The primary emphasis is therefore on **conservation** of the heathland with a secondary aim of **enhancement** (refer to table below).

		Landscape Condition		
		Good	Moderate	Poor
Strength of Character	Strong	<b>Conserve</b>	Conserve and Enhance	Enhance
	Moderate	Conserve and Enhance	Enhance	Enhance and Restore
	Weak	Enhance	Enhance and Restore	Restore

Applying this approach not only provides a focus for landscape management but also allows an understanding of which landscape types require more immediate attention and/or greater intervention compared with those that are fairing better and in a more favourable state.

The table overleaf is a summary of the *landscape character and condition* judgements outlined under the evaluation section for each of the landscape types, along with the associated management focus as per the table above. A number has been applied to each landscape as a guide for prioritising changes to management approach, in order to bring the landscape back to an optimum conditional state, thereby strengthening character overall (where 1 is highest priority and 5 is lowest).

<b>Landscape Character Type</b>	<b>Strength of Character</b>	<b>Condition</b>	<b>Management Focus</b>	<b>Priority</b>
River Valley and Agricultural Fringe	Strong	Moderate	<b>Conserve and Enhance</b>	4
Wooded and Famed Escarpment	Strong	Moderate-Good	<i>Conserve and Enhance</i>	5
Rolling Farmland and Settled Combes	Strong	Moderate	<b>Conserve and Enhance</b>	4
Open Hills	Strong	Moderate-Good	<i>Conserve and Enhance</i>	5
Lowland Hills to Coast	Moderate	Moderate	<b>Conserve and Enhance</b>	3
Jurassic Coast	Strong	Moderate	<b>Conserve and Enhance</b>	4
Heathland Hills and Combes	Strong	Moderate-Good	<i>Conserve and Enhance</i>	5
Agricultural Fringe to Coast	Strong	Moderate	<b>Conserve and Enhance</b>	4
Forested Hills and Combes	Strong	Good	<i>Conserve and Enhance</i>	5
Wooded Combes	Strong	Moderate-Good	<i>Conserve and Enhance</i>	5
Arable Plateaux	Moderate	Poor	<b>Enhance and Restore</b>	1
Agricultural Foothills	Moderate	Moderate-Poor	<b>Enhance and Restore</b>	2

# Appendix 2

## Perceptions of the landscape



COOKSON & TICKNER  
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

# Perceptions of the landscape

The text below is taken from the 1997 Landscape Assessment of the Quantock Hills by Land Use Consultants with Richard McDonnell Archaeological Consultants. It provides a summary of important historic associations, and key literary and artistic references within and associated with the Quantock Hills.

## Introduction

A landscape can assume national significance not only because of its particular character and qualities, but also because of the special cultural association that it may have. The Quantocks were home, for a short period, to both Wordsworth and Coleridge and the landscape inspired some of their finest poetry. The AONB is nationally important for its role in the development of the English Romantic, a movement with its origins in the Picturesque tradition, which also found inspiration in the Quantock Hills. The poets were attracted by the Quantock's special and unique landscape qualities including its 'tamed' wilderness, secret and secluded character and contrasting and surprising variety of scenery. These qualities have consistently attracted attention and comment and re-occur as themes in descriptive writings about the hills and are one of the reasons why the area is considered to be 'outstanding'. These perceptions and perspectives on the Quantock landscape are examined below.

## Historical Associations

Andrew Crosse (1784-1855), a pioneer of atmospheric electricity lived at Fyne Court, Broomfield, now the headquarters of the Somerset Wildlife Trust. Crosse rigged up his experiments in the grounds of the estate, which led to him being known locally as the Thunder and Lightning Man and is thought to have been the inspiration for Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*. Crosse was greatly inspired by the Quantock landscape and was passionately attached to the hills. In his 'Memorials' he wrote (1):

*"Over these wild and beautiful hills at all hours of day and night, in all seasons, I have wandered and never in vain"*

*"It is not merely in the enchanting month of May...or during the rich tints of autumnal scenery, when the purple heath covers the hills with its glorious dyes.... It is not merely at these times that the range of the Quantocks demands admiration. Even the sterile winter possesses adornments."*

The hills feature in several descriptions of Monmouth's rebellion and Triscombe Stone is the focal point of a number of historical romances based on the rebellion. These include vivid description of the landscape (2).

*The combes view from the summit...had the appearance of huge masses of foliage endeavouring to creep serpent-like up the sides of the moist valleys until ultimately brought to a standstill for lack of adequate moisture*

The Quantocks are best known for their association with the romantic poets, Coleridge and Wordsworth. Coleridge was attracted to the area by his friend, Thomas Poole, a tanner of Nether Stowey, who he was introduced to while on a walking tour of Somerset with Robert Southey in 1794. Poole obtained a cottage for Coleridge and his family in Lime Street in Nether Stowey in 1796 and William and Dorothy Wordsworth were subsequently persuaded by Coleridge to take on a tenancy at Alfoxden (Alfoxton) a large house set in parkland near Holford. Over the years, Poole a learned man with great knowledge and insight, introduced many distinguished guest to the Quantocks including Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt and De Quincy all of whom went on to achieve eminence in literature.

A number of other writers, lived in the area and were inspired by the Quantock landscape. Sir Henry Newbolt (1862-1938) poet and naval historian settled in Aisholt in the 1930's. Newbolt is most famous for his poems describing the great sea battles, notably 'Drake's Drum' and 'Admirals All'. He described Aisholt as his 'beloved valley' and wrote of Aisholt Church (3)

*"It has that unmistakable mark of the centuries, so quiet and eternal ... and it stands so perfectly with the woods close behind and the village winding down the hill past it".*

Phyllis Bottome, novelist, lived in the rectory at Over Stowey from 1887 to 1892. In her biography 'Search of a Soul' (4). She describes "the beauty of the waterfalls and streams, the deep red earth, the strong wiry bracken, the lovely heather hills, the fragrant drenched woods, full of moss and ferns; these were the master-pieces of my childhood's work."

## **Artistic representations of the landscape**

There are a number of eighteenth and nineteenth century water-colours and pen and ink sketches of the Quantocks, in which the rolling hills are frequently shown as the back drop to a manor house or parkland landscape. A good example is provided by the View of the Quantock Hills seen from West Quantoxhead. Other themes taken up by artists are the view out from the hills as illustrated, for example by the View from Dowsborough or the View from the Quantocks towards Minehead.

In the later nineteenth century groups of artists began to settle in colonies on the English Coast. The Schools of Art established at St Ives and Newlyn are the best known examples. At this time a small group of artists were attracted to the Quantocks by the Taunton Artist, John William North A.R.A., R.W.S. (1842-1924), a landscape painter in the popular tradition. In the 1860's North discovered Halsway Manor in the Quantock Hills and tempted fellow artists Frederick Walker A.R.A., O.W.S (1840-1875) and George Pinwell (1842 – 1875) to the area. However, the constant mists and rain experienced on the hills were very different to the hard bright light of the Cornwall coast and no school of painting subsequently developed in the area. Paintings of the Quantock Hills by J.W North appear

in the English Illustrated Magazine of 1997 and accompany Richard Jefferies description of Summer in Somerset (5)

In addition to visual representations of the landscape the Quantock Hills are also famous for their decorative and ornamented churches which frequently include depictions of the local landscape. Highly decorative wood carvings which are found in churches throughout the AONB. The carved wooden bench ends, screens and fonts often display a mix of pagan and Christian symbolism, rich with foliated tracery and representations of local plants and legends. The carvings date to the fifteenth century, when wealth from the flourishing woollen cloth trade was available to beautify the churches and the wooded slopes rising up into the hills provided an abundant local source of oak for carving. The bench end carvings in Crowcombe Church are outstanding and justly renown. Here, the Green Man is depicted several times with vines growing from his mouth. In another, the men of Crowcombe are shown attacking the dragon of nearby Shervage Woods. Foliage typical of the area is also represented in many of the carvings.

The elaborate stone carvings which ornament the church towers are another feature of the area. These carvings, have a purely aesthetic function, and are situated high up above the ground on the towers where they are almost lost to the eye except for their silhouette. Locally known as 'hunky punks', the carvings belong to the second half of the Perpendicular period between 1500 and the Reformation. Like the wood carvings the ornamented towers result from the wealth generated by the wool trade. They include animals, birds and pagan creatures with their origin in local mythology and folklore. Good examples of dragons and lion dogs can be found on the church tower at Kingston St. Mary.

## **The Picturesque to the Romantic**

The picturesque movement of the late eighteenth century was a prelude to Romanticism and occurred at a time when art was shifting in appeal from the reason to the imagination. The Picturesque and Romantic both have resonance in the Quantock landscape.

### *Gilpin and the Picturesque*

The Rev. William Gilpin, one of the founders of the Picturesque tradition, recorded his visual impressions of the Quantock scenery in his work 'Observations on the Western Parts of England (1798)'. (6).

*"From Enmore-castle we ascended Quantock Hills. From the high grounds here, as we now approached the sea, we were entertained with beautiful coast views, which make a very agreeable species of landscape. The first scene of this time was composed of Bridgwater Bay, and the land around it. We saw indeed the two islands of Flat-holms and Steep-holms, and the Welsh coast beyond them; but they were wrapped in the ambiguity of a hazy atmosphere, which was of no advantage to the view."*

Gilpin uses this experience to give treatise on how haziness can have a good effect in a picturesque scene uniting the variety of objects, shapes and hues which compose a landscape. He calls this the 'scenery of vapour'. On the lifting of the mist he states:

*"The going off of mists and fogs is among the most beautiful circumstances belonging to them. While the obscurity is only partially clearing away, it often occasions a pleasing contrast between the formed and unformed parts of a landscape; and like cleaning a dirty picture, pleases the eye with feeling one part after another emerges into brightness"*

This perception of the landscape is later repeated in the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge.

### **Arcadian Landscapes**

The Quantock Hills also provide the setting and backdrop to two outstanding landscapes, of the Picturesque movement. Halswell House, near Goathurst and Hestercombe, near Kingston St Mary, both lie just outside the boundary of the AONB, but exploit their location on the slopes of the Quantocks with the swelling hills behind and panoramic views spreading out before them. At Hestercombe, Coplestone Warre Bampfylde the then owner, created an Arcadian garden in the wooded combe to the north of the house, between 1750 and 1788. Coplestone warre Bampfylde was also an accomplished amateur artist and produced a large number of drawing and paintings in the manner of Claude and Poussin, of scenery throughout the country. He was a good friend of Henry Hoare and made frequent visits and paintings of the famous picturesque landscape at Stourhead. Sir Charles Kemey Tynte of Haswell, with Coplestone Warre Bampfylde and Henry Hoare, completed this trio of important Georgian landscape designers in the vanguard of the Picturesque. The landscape at Halswell House created by Tynte, is considered by garden historian Gervase Jackson-Stopes to be among the undoubted triumphs of the Picturesque movement.

### **Coleridge and Wordsworth – the Romantic Movement**

The Romantic poets, took Gilpin's visual approach to the picturesque and turned it into a poetic one. Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, both spent a year living in the Quantocks, where they walked the hills and through their discussions and writings originated the romantic school of poetry.

Soon after his arrival in Nether Stowey, Coleridge began to explore to the Quantock landscape, which had a powerful influence on his poetry. He recalls in his '*Biographia*' (7)

*"With my pencil and memorandum book in my hand, I was making studies, as the artists call them, and often moulding my thoughts into verse, with the objects and imagery immediately before my senses"*

Thomas Mayberry describes the influence of the landscape of in his book 'Coleridge and Wordsworth in the West Country'. (8)

*"The distinctive moods of the rich and various landscapes which crowded near to Stowey were becoming for Coleridge almost a reflex of his own moods and throughout – the broad uplands of the Quantock Hills as counterpoint to the speculative power of a mind 'habituated to the vast', the lowland villages an expression... of the loving companionship of friends and family, the hidden dell (in Holford Combe) where the voice of nature sounded in the waterfall, a retreat by turns comforting and mysterious to serve his recurrent longings for escape."*

The short time spent in the Quantocks was one of Coleridge's most creative periods. Here, he completed many of his most famous poems including the 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner', 'This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison', 'the Nightingale', 'frost at Midnight', 'fears in Solitude', 'Kubla Khan', 'Christabel' and the verse tragedy 'Osorio'. These poems all draw, to some extent on the surrounding landscape. The poem that most directly describes the Quantocks is 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison' written when Coleridge was left at home in the garden of Lime Cottage, while his friends went on an excursion into the hills. The poem is addressed to Charles Lamb and describes the journey across the hills, as Coleridge imagined it. (9)

*"On springy heath, along the hill-top edge,  
Wander in gladness, and wind down, perchance,  
To that still roaring dell, of which I told;  
The roaring dell, o'er wooded, narrow, deep,  
And only speckled by the mid-day sun;  
Wher its slim trunk the ash from rock to rock  
Flings arching like a bridge;"*

*..... "Now my friends emerge  
Beneath the wide wide Heaven – and view again  
The many-steeple tract magnificent  
Of hilly fields and meadow, and the sea,  
With some fair bark, perhaps, whose sails light up  
The slip of smooth clear blue betwixt two Isles  
Of purple shadow!"*

During his year t Alfoxton Wordsworth completed some twenty poems. Although he rarely mentions the Quantocks by name, many of these poems describe local scenes and characters and obviously draw inspiration from the surrounding landscape. 'Lines written in Early Spring' for example was composed by the waterfall in Holford Combe (10)

*"I heard a thousand blended notes  
While in a grove I site reclined.  
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts  
Bring sad thoughts to the mind,"*

This waterfall in Holford Combe has special place in the creative phsyce of Coleridge and Wordsworth and is seen as an expression of the animation and vitality of nature. William Wordsworth describes this scene in prose:

*"It was a chosen resort of mine. The brook fell down a sloping rock, considerable for that country, and across the pool below and fallen an ash-tree from which rose perpendicularly boughs in search of the light, intercepted by the deep shade above. The boughs bore leaves of green that for want of sunshine had faded into almost lily-white; and from the underside of this natural sylvan bridge depended on long and beautiful tresses of ivy, which waved gently in the breeze that might be called the breath of the waterfall."*

During their year in the Quantocks, Wordsworth and Coleridge published a joint volume of verse entitled 'Lyrical Ballads'. (11) The lyrical Ballads has its origin firmly in the Quantocks and is considered to be a landmark in English romantic poetry. In the Prelude to this work, Wordsworth acknowledges the landscape as a source of inspiration:

*"That summer, under whose indulgent skies  
Upon smooth Quantocks airy ridge we roved  
Unchecked, or loitered 'mid their sylvan combs;  
Thou, in bewitching words with happy heart,  
Didst chaunt the vision of the Ancient Mane,  
Thr bright-eyed Mariner, and rueful woes  
Didst utter of the Lady christabel"*

Wordsworth was greatly influenced of his sister Dorothy who opened his eyes to see the rarer beauties of the landscape. Her response to nature was more subtle than either of the two poets and, in her journal (12) she records the minutiae of the list at Alfoxden, and includes many evocative descriptions of the Quantocks and their unique quality of 'wild simplicity':

*"Wherever we turn we have woods, smooth downs, and valleys with small brooks running down them trough meadows hardly ever intersected with hedgerows but scattered over with trees. The hills that cradle these villages are either covered with fern or bilberries or oakwoods – walks extend for miles over the hilltops, the great beauty of which is their wild simplicity."*

*"There is everything here, the sea, woods wild as fancy every painted, and William and I in a wander by ourselves found out a sequestered waterfall in a dell formed by steep hills covered by full grown timber in trees. The woods are as find as those at Lowther, and the country more romantic; it has the character of less grand parts of the lakes."*

## **Descriptive Writings**

The Quantock landscape has inspired numerous passages in guidebooks, novels and poems which describe the special qualities of the area. A number of themes consistently re-occur in these writings and evoke the essential spirit and tenor of the landscape. These themes are considered here.

## **A Secret Landscape**

Many writers comment this surprising aspect of the Quantocks: is a landscape that takes time to get to know and only reveals its true identity slowly. This relates to both its physical character, for example the landform conceals secret deep combes, and mists often obscure the scenery, as well as more personal, spiritual perception of the landscape.

Berta Lawrence, a local author describes a walk up Danesborough Hill in autumn in her book 'Quantock Country' (13):

*"As we stood there the sun penetrated the mist so that the lines and curves of the hidden hills facing us slowly revealed themselves, vague at first and then in clearer outline. Next appeared the dearly-shadowed rifts of the combes, then the thin pencilling of tiny paths scrawled over the side of the Woodlands hill, then we made out a hawk hovering above Woodlands before he dived"*

This aspect of the landscape is similarly commented on by another local author, Beatrix Cresswell, describing rambles on the hills (14)

*"These wooded undulating slopes have an odd fashion of hiding themselves. There are days when half concealed by misty veils they seem distant, lofty, unattainable, while at other times they appear to draw within reach and laughingly shew us how easy they are to climb"*

*"Nature reveals herself slowly, she will not draw aside her veil too soon, we must know her intimately before we can declare that we have seen her, face to face."*

*"he who comes to the Quantock land must bring powers of interest and observation with him, for here Nature does not compel his admiration by bold display, but has all the shy beauties of the sylvan dryad."*

Another writer the Rev. William Nichols, states in his book on 'The Quantocks and their Associations' (15)

*"Few strangers, however, who travel along the public road at the base of these hills would anticipate the countless beauties that lie hidden in the recesses of their "dingles and bosky dells". Nor the splendid prospects which their heights command"*

He goes on to comment that the attractions of the Quantock landscape are more subtle than those of the more savage mountain scenery fashionable at the time of this writing (1891)

*"This exaggerated passion for lofty mountains, so much in vogue of late years, appears to have been unknown to classical antiquity, and the greatest poets and painters would seem to have drawn but little of their inspiration from its influence. Beauty of scenery is in truth independent of mere altitude and expanse, and grandeur is not necessarily connected with magnitude. To persons who are susceptible of the true enjoyment of external nature, and can watch with an intelligent eye the constant changes of shade and colour in landscape, and note the delicate harmonies and manifold transformations in the sea, and*

sky, and cloud, which succeed each other in such infinite variety; - to them, the wild heathy moorlands, the softly rounded heights, and the deep-sunk combes of the Quantocks will, however inferior in scale, be found, in their way scarcely less impressive than the passes of the Alps of the mountains of Switzerland."

### ***The View to the Hills***

The dramatic landform exerts an influence over the landscape of a wide area surrounding the hills. This effect is described by a number of writers:

*"Against the sky the outline of the hills stencils itself in a series of pure curves and flowing lines, never interrupted, never angular or peaked, ending in a great curve drawn downwards to the sea at East Quantoxhead and St Audries".(13)*

In the view from the top of Kilton Hill: *"the whole length of the range lies before the eyes, from Cothelstone Beacon, turret-crowned on the south, to where the range drops at West Quantoxhead into the sea". (14)*

### ***The View from the Hills***

Legend has it that the Julius Caesar surveying the scene from the summit of Danesborough (Dowsborough) Hill cried *"Quantum ab hoc"* (how much here!) and thus naming the hills. The expansive views from each of the main summits of Dowsborough, Cothelstone, Wills Nick, Beacon Hill are the subject for an extensive body of writing, describing the complexity and variety of scenery embracing, fertile farmlands, sea, uplands hills and the levels and moors.

*"South-west the range looks over the vale of Taunton to the smokey blue line of the Blackdown hills, and across the Brendon Hills to Exmoor rolling unbounded towards the phantom shape of Dunkery on the horizon. North-east it surveys the Bristol Channel, more poetically named the Severn Sea, its apparently floating islands of Flat Holm and Steep Holm, and on a clear day the Welsh hills across the grey water. A keen sight can descry Glastonbury tor rising dimly beyond the green flats and water-course of Sedgemoor". (13)*

Dorothy Wordsworth describes the view of the sea:

*"Walked with Coleridge over the hills. The sea at first obscured by vapour; that vapour afterwards slid in one mighty mass along the sea-shore; the islands and one point of land clear beyond it. The distant country (which was purple in the clear dull air), overhung by straggling clouds that sailed over it,.....I never saw such a union of earth, sky and sea."*

A number of writers compare the lonely remote heathland summits and the scenes of culture and prosperity that are laid out in the view from the hills. These embrace an intimate domestic landscape of enclosed fields, churches, villages and farms which create a dramatic contrast with the wilderness and solitude evoked by the upland viewpoint. They also include views down the 'path of time' as Beatrix Cresswell describes in the view from Cothelstone Beacon: (14)

*"Turning to the farthest east the country within view stretches up to the Mendips, a scene of long green marshy flats, broken up by the Polden hills. The mound of Boroughbridge, close at hand, reminds us of Athhelney and King Alfred, just as Glastonbury Tor, farther in the distance, recalls Saint Joseph of Arimathea."*

The sudden and surprising views which are so characteristic of the Quantocks are also frequently remarked on. Coleridge recalls the sudden and startling prospects in his poem 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison', in which he follows the route taken by his visitors in a walk through a wooded combe and emerging onto the open Quantock hilltop. The view over the flat lands of Sedgemoor is described by Coleridge in his poem 'Fears in solitude'. This begins with a description of a lonely descent from the summit and the startling experience of a sudden '*burst of prospect*' from the brow of the hill:

*"...the mighty majesty  
Of that huge amphitheatre of rich  
And elmy fields seems like society  
Conversing with the mind and giving it  
A livelier impulse and a dance of thought".*

Similarly in a description of an ascent of Cothestone Hill, Cresswell states (14):

*"We are gradually led under the trees which shut out every view till at the top they open to reveal vistas of hill beyond hill, combe beyond combe, equally green, wooded and luxuriant."*

### ***An intimate Landscape – Tamed Wilderness***

The '*wild simplicity*' of the Quantock landscape is frequently alluded to in descriptions of the hills. They are perceived as a tamed wilderness and are not threatening like other upland landscapes. Bel Mooney writes (16):

*"The Quantocks are not as forbidding, as Exmoor can be. There are long deep coombes shady with trees, and in the autumn the colours blaze. I prefer these hills to either Exmoor or the Mendips, because there is something paradoxically tame about their wild beauty, perhaps it is the scale: undaunting, unthreatening, they remind man less of his puniness than of his infinite possibilities. On the Quantocks, your imagination is enlarged."*

*"In the Quantocks there is nothing of that vast wildness which gives almost a touch of terror to some of our English moors. Here Dame Nature is all tenderness" (14).*

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