Character Area 11

Avon Valley

General Description of Character

4.198 This large character area is focused around the River Avon, its tributaries, Brinkworth Brook and Marston River and the surrounding low-lying landscape. The Avon meanders from Malmesbury to the north, through Chippenham, to leave the district below Lacock Abbey in the south. Brinkworth Brook runs from below Woottton Bassett to join the River Avon in the west; and River Marston runs west from Calne. The area is hemmed in by elevated ground surrounding the area and sits below 70m AOD, and at its lowest point is 36m AOD below Lacock.

4.199 The topography is characterised by a predominantly level landscape with only minor undulations at its fringes as the land runs to higher ground. This produces a wide flat valley with areas of openness and vast skies. Towards the south the surrounding topography of adjacent character areas provides more enclosure. The geology underlying this landscape varies, from alluvium and river terrace gravel adjacent to the watercourses, to the dominance of Oxford and Kellaway Clays on the adjacent land. There are large tracts of Kellaway sand which provides pockets of free draining high-grade agricultural land, throughout the valley.

4.200 The landscape is managed through mixed agricultural practices, with arable dominating the freer draining higher-grade agricultural land, and the damper land adjacent to the watercourses consisting almost entirely of wet grassland, including areas of meadow which are designated Sites of Special Scientific Interest. Through much of area the integrity of the hedges and hedgerow trees provides a sense of enclosure. Below Chippenham, to the south, hazel hedges are evident, providing a variety to the character of the area. On tracts of intensively farmed arable land hedges are gappy and lacking trees, and the area has an exposed character. This is especially prevalent on the fringes of development and communication corridors. The character on the urban fringes of Chippenham, is further influenced by the built form and roads which are particularly prominent to the south west of the town.

4.201 The area has limited tree cover which is restricted to shelterbelts, hedgerow trees and small clumps of woodland. The latter are infrequent throughout the area but are slightly more evident to the south, below and around Chippenham, reducing the effect of the urban fringe. Poplar windbreaks are frequent across the whole area, breaking up views and acting as significant landscape features. The presence of watercourses through the area is marked by riparian vegetation dominated by willow, frequently pollarded, which enhances the damp, low lying character of these areas.

4.202 The water related character is further developed by the open ditches system which is prominent along low lying roadsides. The watercourses themselves are attractive and interesting features, meandering through landscape. Bridges across the river and causeways across wetter areas are significant elements relating to the watercourses. Maud Heath Causeway, north east of Chippenham, is one of the most well known. It was created circa 1458 as an investment by an individual for the public good.

4.203 With the exception of Chippenham, settlements are generally small, with a vernacular core, constructed of a mixture of Oolitic limestone and local brick, with varying degrees of 20th century development. Church towers are local landmarks within the settlements and their immediate environs but are less significant features in the wider landscape.

4.204 Chippenham’s early development was linked to its importance as a Saxon administrative centre, the old core of the town sited as today within a loop of the Avon. The town sat on the Bristol-London road, part of a national road system, highly developed by the mid 14th century. However, significant expansion of the town began at the end of the 18th century with further development of communication links. Both the Wiltshire & Berkshire Canal and then the GWR London to Bristol line allowed the existing cloth industry of the town and surrounding area to flourish and other industries to develop. Extensive late 20th century development once more expanded the town, probably as a result of the town’s proximity to the M4. Large scale expansions associated with peripheral roads have occurred particularly to the west and north west, but also to the south east. The valley bottom of the Avon has generally been avoided and forms a green corridor into and through the town part of which is used for recreational purposes. Development is particularly prominent on the rising land to the north.

4.205 The village of Lacock sits to the south of the area- a settlement dating from the 13th century which gained prosperity through the wool industry. The village remains largely unchanged, an eclectic mix of built styles and materials, maintained by the National Trust. The village, adjacent settlement and surrounding settled landscape make this area a popular visitor destination.
4.206 There is evidence of habitation from prehistoric times, with numerous crop marks visible. These are more obvious north of Chippenham, along the Avon. Discoveries denoting man’s intervention within this landscape continue through Roman times, with the presence of settlement remains. Through both the Avon valley & Brinkworth Vale a wealth of medieval settlement existed. Many of these villages were lost through the Black Death and resulting changes in agricultural systems.

4.207 The A4 and A350 are significant roads in the southern part of the area. The A4 east west through Chippenham and the A340 runs along the south western fringes. The only road of significance to the north is the M4 motorway. This creates a major feature, source of noise and barrier in the landscape as it cuts through the valley. Away from the main roads traffic is very light, the scattering of small hamlets serviced by minor, often single-track roads, which enhance the rural character.

4.208 Two railways traverse the area. The main line London to Cardiff runs east west from Wootton Bassett through Brinkworth Brook valley and London to Exeter one runs south west through Chippenham. These are heavily vegetated with hedgerow species, reducing their effect on the landscape. The airfield at RAF Lyneham lies on high ground to the east, beyond the character area boundary. The heavy use of the airfield by cargo aircraft disturbs the inherent tranquility of the surrounding area. Additionally, electricity transmission lines form dominant structures in this flat landscape.

4.209 There is a comprehensive network of footpath and recreation routes throughout the area, although few have any direct relation to the watercourses. The line of the Wiltshire & Berkshire Canal runs along the eastern edge of the area providing a distinct feature in the landscape.

**Main characteristics**

4.210 The main characteristics of the area can be defined as follows:

- Low-lying river landscape, between 70m and 30m AOD on river terrace and alluvial geology with heavy soils, interspersed with light sands.
- Dominant presence of water in the form of ditches, streams and river with related riparian vegetation and structures.
- Damp meadow and pasture along watercourses/valley floor.
- Intact and predominantly well managed hedgerows frequently with hedgerow trees.
- Areas of high quality arable agricultural land located through out the area, on areas of Kelliways Sand.
- Shelterbelts of poplar act as significant vertical elements in the horizontal landscape.
- Rural and somewhat isolated feel to remoter parts of character area.
- Scattered settlements and dwellings.
- Strong rural sense of place, which begins to break down around Chippenham and communication corridor.
- Green valley floor through Chippenham.
- Broad expansive skyline, frequently unbroken by development.
- Significance of electricity transmission lines.

**Management Guidelines**

4.211 The overall objectives for the area are to conserve the rural character, and ensure development of the urban fringe and communication corridors does not compromise the nature of the area.

4.212 Individual elements within the landscape which make up the character should be maintained, conserved and when necessary replenished. This should include the retention of the ditch system which runs through the area, maintenance and replacement of hedges.

4.213 Conserve and where possible enhance the biodiversity of the watercourse, its environs and adjacent habitats.

4.214 Features of historical and archaeological interest relating to man’s use of this wet landscape and early settlement features will also require care and protection.

4.215 Minimise the landscape and visual effects of the expansion of Chippenham.

**Management Strategy Actions**

4.216 Conserve and enhance the Character Area through carrying out the following actions:
Short Term

- Conserve valley bottoms including wetland features, open ditches, meadows and riparian vegetation, especially willows.
- Conserve hedgerows and mature trees, including allowing new trees to emerge in existing hedges, and discourage field amalgamation.
- Consider where development related to Chippenham is most appropriate in terms of landscape and visual effects.
- Enhance the sense of place through use of appropriate building materials in respect of new development, extensions or other built features - especially through the use of materials used in vernacular buildings.
- Conserve the alignment and features of the Wiltshire & Berkshire Canal

Long Term

- Encourage the creation of public access along waterways, where consistent with nature conservation objectives.

Key Views management strategy

4.217 The area is primarily viewed from the M4, A350 and from the edges of Chippenham. Elsewhere, the large scale of the character area, views reduced by level topography and vegetation and the sparse settlement pattern make view points scarce. Watercourses are important so views from bridges over the Avon should be monitored.

4.218 Indicators for change within this area should include:

- Change to watercourses.
- Loss of riparian vegetation
- Loss of grassland through the area particularly adjacent to watercourses.
- Amalgamation of fields
- Loss of mature hedgerow trees
- Expansion of Chippenham
- Establishment of screening around Chippenham

Landscape Sensitivity

4.219 Away from the influence of Chippenham, much of the area has an essentially rural character with small, scattered settlements and individual dwellings. The landscape is predominantly gently undulating with vegetation preventing extensive views. Only small-scale, sensitively designed development, appropriately associated with existing built form, could be successfully accommodated without adverse landscape impacts.

4.220 Around Chippenham, the original settlement in the valley bottom has expanded up the valley sides. These areas are exposed to wider views and are sensitive to further development. Care is required in further expansion of the town to minimise the effect on landscape and visual receptors. Development should be carried in conjunction with the development of a strong landscape structure to repair urban fringe landscapes.

4.221 Where the traditional settlement form meets the landscape in river corridors or other green wedges, these areas should be kept free of new development to protect the relationship between built form and landscape. The valley floor overall is a sensitive landscape with some of the most attractive landscapes of the area focussed on the watercourses and riparian vegetation.