

Proposed Dorset and East Devon National Park

Evidence and Sources used to support the Proposal

Theme: The Landscapes of the Dorset AONB and Dorset Heaths, and East Devon AONB

Dorset AONB

The Dorset AONB is much more than just one fine landscape - it is a collection of fine landscapes. Within its 1129km², the AONB encompasses 14 types of landscape, each with its own unique character. See Appendix 1.

These landscapes have been shaped by thousands of years of human inter-action with the environment. Impressive geological formations and natural processes have created landforms which people have helped shape into distinctive landscapes.

Open chalk upland

The open chalk uplands of the Chaldon Downs, Dorchester Downs and South Dorset Downs form significant areas of the AONB. They are simple, large scale landscapes of rolling, open hills and dry valleys with large agricultural estates mainly under arable production. Partly circled by a narrow face of steep escarpments, the open uplands provide the setting for a series of intimate chalk river valleys.

Chalk ridge escarpment

The North, West and South Escarpments and the Purbeck Ridge form dramatic backdrops to, and give views of, much of the surrounding AONB. Although in geological terms an escarpment is slightly different to a ridge, they have been grouped together for the purposes of DCC's landscape assessment as they share very similar characteristics and management requirements. With an undeveloped and open character, this landscape type with its steep sides supports important patches of chalk grasslands and hanging woodlands of Lamora Birch.

Chalk valley and downland

The distinctive, secluded chalk valleys of the AONB drain the surrounding open chalk downlands. Flowing southwards into the larger Stour, Piddle and Frome rivers, each valley has its own unique character and sense of place, with a diversity of important habitats and cultural features. With traces of old water meadows, distinctive church spires, country houses and characteristic settlements of stone, brick and flint; the chalk valleys display a rich rural, cultural heritage.

Clay valley

The sweeping landscapes of the Kimmeridge Coast, Corfe, and Bride valleys each have a unique identity. Enclosed by surrounding escarpments and ridges, they generally have a settled rural character with coastal influences. A patchwork of rolling pastures and scattered woodlands has been shaped by centuries of woodland clearance and agricultural improvement. Small farmsteads and nucleated villages with landmark churches are dotted throughout the landscape.

Lowland heath

The internationally important lowland heathland landscape of the South Purbeck Heaths, similar to many other heathland landscapes around the Poole Basin, is a complex and diverse mosaic of open dry and wet heath and wooded scrubby heath. A range of land uses affects condition, with the fragile heaths under constant pressures. Remaining heathland patches, many of which are internationally important habitats, are fragmented by significant conifer plantations, with a variety of land uses including mineral extraction and planned farms. The wild appearance of the open heathlands is well documented in Thomas Hardy's writings.

Valley pasture

The valley pasture landscape type is found along the lower reaches of the Stour and Frome, formed from alluvial deposits. The rivers have wide, open meandering floodplains that historically support transport routes and market towns around the fringes. A series of wet woodlands, large pastures and water meadows is typical of this landscape type.

Limestone plateau

The Purbeck Plateau is the only limestone plateau in Dorset. It has a simple but striking character represented by its exposed and treeless appearance. A long tradition of small-scale stone working has left its mark in a near continuous network of stone walls, in extraction routes and small quarries dotted around the area. Limestone villages and open grasslands add to the character of this distinct landscape type.

Ridge & Vale

The Ridge and Vale landscape type covers two character areas to the east and west of Weymouth. Backed by the South Dorset Escarpment, these types are characterised by low-lying limestone ridges running east to west, with undulating clay vales of mixed farming and nucleated villages. The open coastal character of Weymouth Bay was captured in a famous painting by John Constable.

Rolling wooded pasture

The rolling wooded pasture landscape type is found around the margins of the Dorset Heaths. Although land cover varies, the areas are unified by remnant heathy patches within a well-wooded landscape of pastures and dense hedgerows, shaping an intimate and rural landscape. Rempstone has a more agricultural character whilst towards Lulworth Castle and estate, the area has strong parkland character.

Coastal grassland

Coastal grasslands, as a habitat, are found along much of the immediate coastline. This only becomes a landscape type where the characteristic coarse grasses, exposed by the full force of the coast, are backed by the southern escarpment and divide it from the inland landscapes. A lack of development and sweeping coastal views underpin a natural appearance.

Clay vale

The clay vale landscape type is represented by the intimate and rural Marshwood and Alstock Vales. They have predominantly small pastoral fields with trimmed hedgerows and hedgerow oaks, patterns of medieval settlement and clearance and a long tradition in dairy farming. Scattered farmsteads underpin the largely undeveloped and tranquil character.

Wooded hills

Significant areas of the western end of the AONB form the intimate Wooded Hills landscape type, with several clusters of conical shaped hills formed around the Marshwood Vale. Typically, woodland is found on the valley sides with a network of dense hedgerows, winding lanes and small clustered settlements dotted throughout the pastoral landscape. The market and coastal towns in and around the area support a long tradition of artistic interpretation of the landscape and local cultural traditions.

Limestone hills

Although found elsewhere around the northern part of the county, the only limestone hill landscape within the AONB is found at Melbury Park. Much of the area is dominated by the designed parkland at Melbury with its distinctive, sweeping landscape. Elsewhere, a series of low, rounded limestone hills with dense wooded sides contrasts with the broad, clay valleys of pastures, arable fields, winding lanes and springs.

Undulating river valleys

The undulating river valleys of the Brit and Axe are centred on the floodplains and associated surrounding branching valleys and undulating hills. They have a diverse character ranging from open countryside to market towns and villages dotted along the upper terraces. Characteristic features include damp pastures, linear wet woodlands along the valley floor with small broadleaved woodlands dotted around the surrounding hills.

Dorset Heaths: Area north of the existing AONB boundary between Dorchester and Upton

See appendix 2 – the pink hatched area.

From east to west:

North Wareham Heath/Forest

An undulating open and expansive heathland landscape, bounded by the Piddle Valley along its western and southern edges, and the fringes of Poole Harbour along the eastern side. Much of the area is an unspoilt patchwork of heath, forestry, scrub, and farmland. Conifer plantations act as screening and landscape features. Recreational use and conservation management are key features, as are the straight fast roads lined with plantation wood/forest.

Morton bog is a distinctive and open landscape feature. Woolsbarrow Fort and Woodbury Hill are scheduled ancient monuments.

Mid Piddle Valley Pasture

An undeveloped and tranquil rural landscape: comprising of a flat relatively narrow valley floor with a meandering river channel; and with associated ditches and channels. Much of the area is a pastoral grazed landscape of small fields, with a mosaic of trees and other vegetation associated with the river; the valley is crossed by narrow lanes and old historic bridges.

Woods and plantations on one or both sides of the river frame and enclose the valley.

Bovington / Alfpuddle Heath & Forest

This is an undulating landscape of heathland, conifer plantation and farmland. It is divided by the Valleys of the Piddle and Frome, and framed to the north by the elevated and wooded ridgeline of the Alfpuddle forest. Its distinctive character is created by the broad scale patchwork of dense plantation forest, open heath, scrub, and farmland.

Much of the area is designated as SPA, SSSI, and/or SNCI for its heathland habitat value, and some as woodland habitat. The area contains a significant number of scheduled ancient monuments. The whole area is well used as a recreational resource with three of Dorset's major visitor attractions within it: Bovington Tank Museum, Monkey World and T. E. Lawrence's small heathland cottage, Clouds Hill (now NT.) Areas of coniferous plantation create bold features and screen the military presence.

Mid Frome Valley pasture

A wider alluvial valley than the Mid Piddle Valley sandwiched between two slightly elevated areas of heath/scrub/farmland. The flat flood plain accommodates the meandering Frome and its many associated wet ditches, small tributaries and channels. Margins of trees associated with these wetlands create important landscape features and a distinctive pattern. The slightly elevated land to the north and south of the valley is largely arable farmland; with medium sized regular shaped fields cultivated hard up to the fringing woodland; in contrast with the rough grazed land and smaller fields abutting the river. There is a narrow belt of designated ancient woodland along the northern side of the floodplain.

Conifer plantations and wet ditches are designated as SNCI, whilst the Frome itself and the associated wet meadows are SSSI's. There are a number of scheduled ancient monuments in the area, and access along the valley is reasonable, with important informal recreation areas.

Crossways / Winfrith Lowland Farmland and Heath.

This is a generally flat farmed landscape sandwiched between the alluvial soils of the Frome valley, and the chalk uplands. It has distinctive elevated areas from the rising land in the southeast onto the chalk, the undulating Winfrith Heath with Whitcombe and Blacknoll Hills as key features, and the northern ridgeline dominated by plantation woodland at West Wood in the Moreton Park Estate. The medium sized fields have some dense hedges with important hedgerow trees and small copses creating a distinctive pattern across the farmland areas. The lanes are straight and lined with thick hedgerows, and there are a few isolated farms and groups of agricultural buildings.

Winfrith and Tadnoll Nature reserves are designated as SPA and SSSI for their wet and dry heathland habitats. A number of barrows and tumuli are scheduled ancient monuments as is the site of a medieval village at West Burton near Wool. The area around Tadnoll hamlet, a well-used recreational resource, forms an intimate and distinctive feature within the wider area, with its narrow winding lanes, small copses and streams.

East Devon AONB

This AONB conserves some of the most unspoilt holiday coast in Britain, yet it also encompasses a surprisingly untouched rural hinterland. It has been a nationally protected landscape since 1963.

The coastal landscapes, stretching from Lyme Regis to Exmouth, show the lush, highly coloured scenery of classic 'postcard Devon'. Devon red sandstone meets the sea in a coastline of sheer high cliffs, steep wooded coombs and coves, its line startlingly broken by the white chalk of Beer Head. The coastline here is internationally important for its geology, the 35 mile stretch forms part of the 95 mile long Dorset and East Devon Coast World Heritage Site – England's first natural World Heritage Site.

Inland, the landscape rises to high, flat and surprisingly remote plateaux, often topped by heathland commons, particularly in the west. In the north it breaks into the hilly country fringing Honiton. The plateau is incised by the north-south flowing rivers Axe, Sid and Otter which wind to the sea through quiet, hedge-bordered meadows.

The AONB's estuaries, heaths and cliff top grasslands are important natural habitats and the 'Undercliffs', the spectacular 8 km landslip near Axmouth, are a National Nature Reserve of great geological and wildlife interest. The AONB's headlands and hilltops show many traces of prehistoric settlement.

The AONB boundary stops short of, or skirts, the resorts of Lyme Regis, Exmouth, Sidmouth and Seaton but these are the main employment, visitor and residential centres. It also skirts the market towns of Ottery St Mary, Honiton and Axminster.

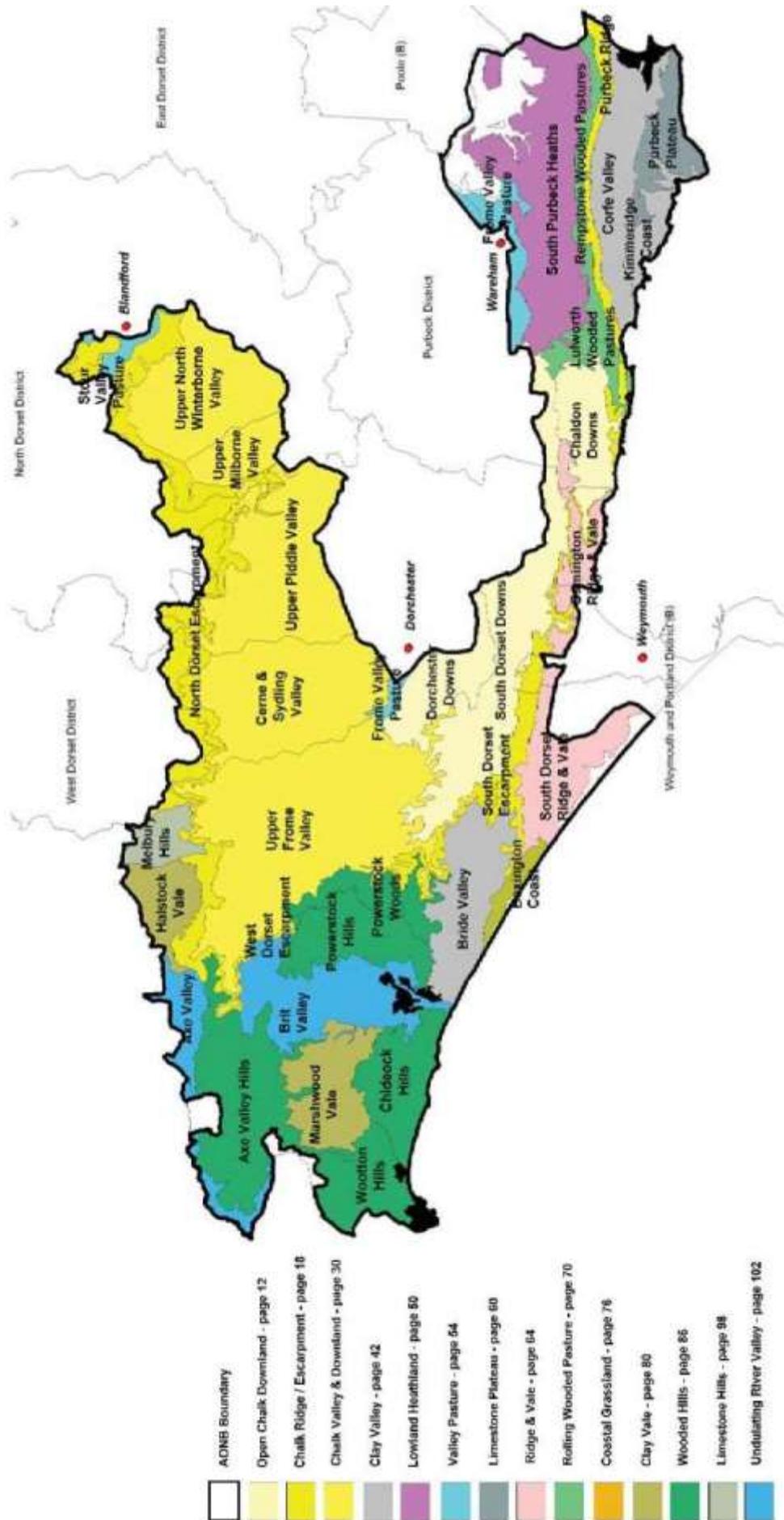
The AONB is increasingly important for informal outdoor recreation, particularly walking, and the South West Coast Path, a National Trail, follows the line of the cliff tops, whilst the East Devon Way is a regionally important route through the heart of the East Devon AONB.

Source references:

Association of National Parks
Jurassic Coast.org
Dorset CC AONB landscape assessment
East Devon AONB
Landscape_Character_Assessment_(non-AONB).pdf

Dorset and East Devon National Park Group

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Appendix 2