

## 12.0 Sevenoaks Greensand Ridge

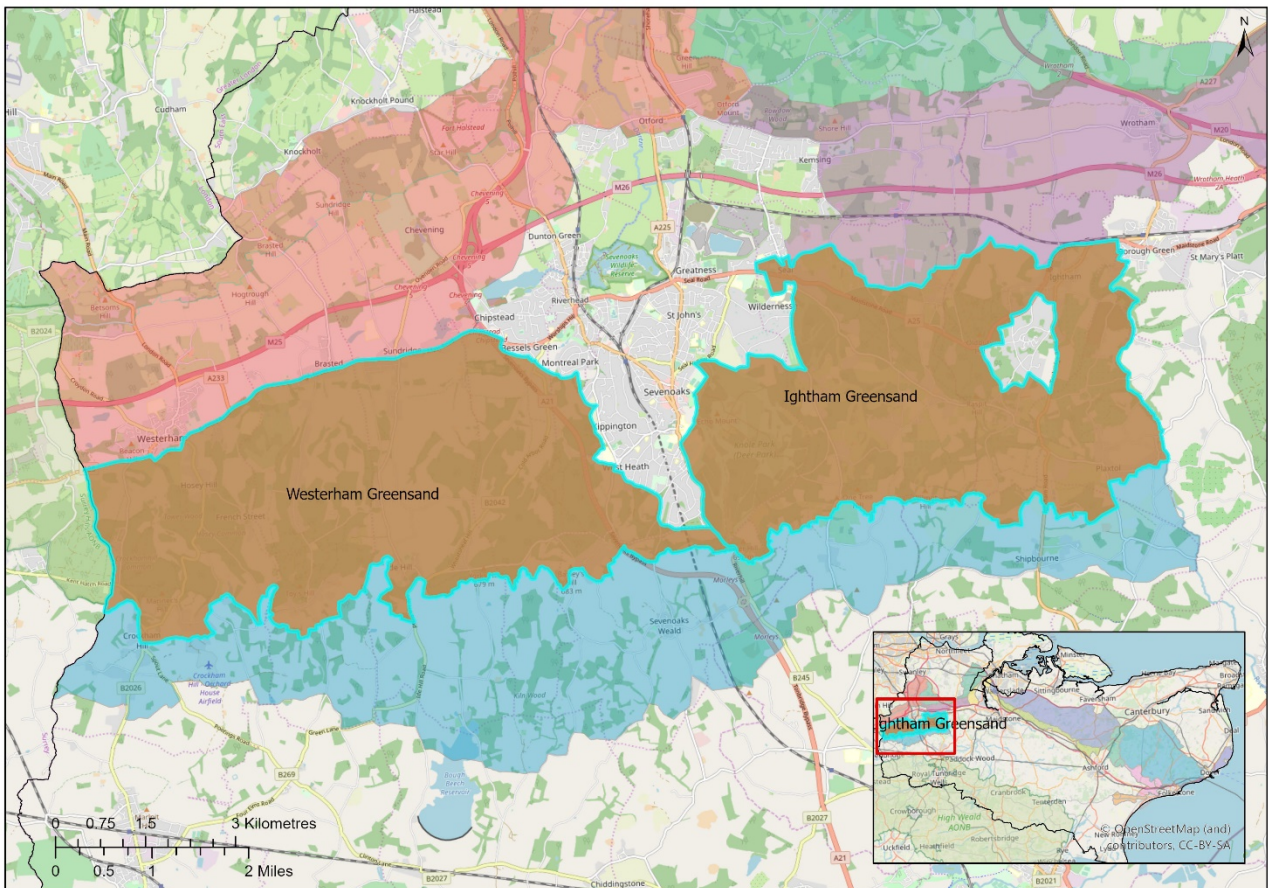
## Landscape Character Area 5A

## Landscape Character Type 5: Greensand

**Districts/ Boroughs:** Sevenoaks; Tonbridge and Malling

**Landscape/Countryside Partnerships:** Darent Valley Landscape Partnership; North West Kent Countryside Partnership

**Location and Context:** This LCA is located at the western end of the Kent Downs AONB, between Westerham and Ightham, and extends to the east and west of Sevenoaks. It is to the south of the Darent Valley and Kemsing Vale LCAs, and to the north of the Eden Valley Low Weald LCA.



*Location map for Sevenoaks Greensand Ridge LCA, also showing Local Character Areas of Westerham Greensand and Ightham Greensand*

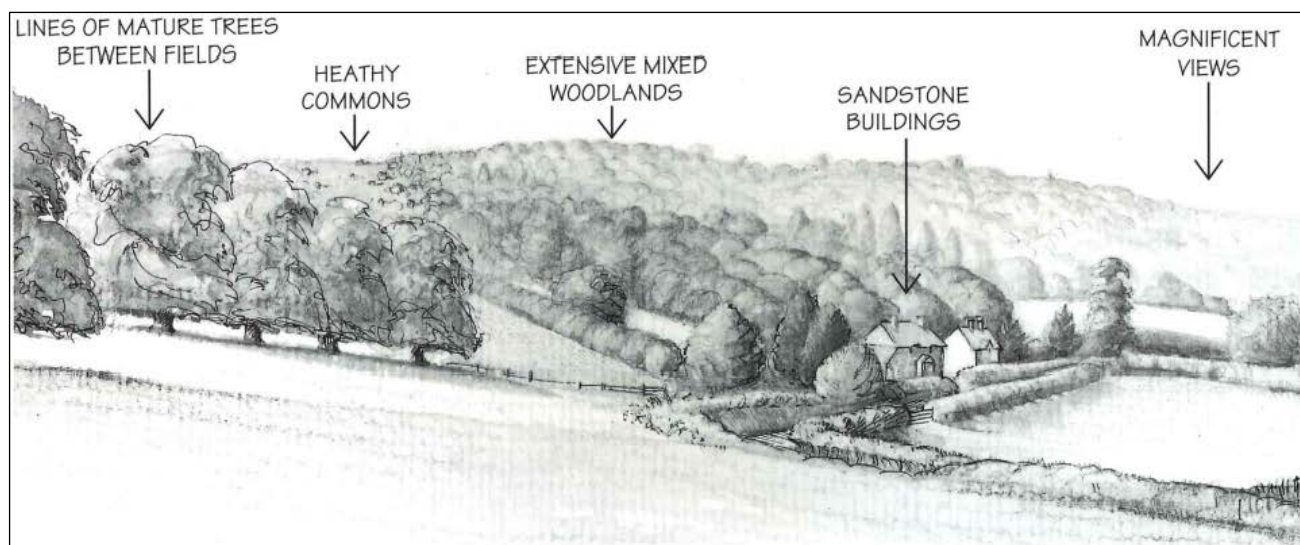


*A typical view within the Sevenoaks Greensand Ridge north-east of Ide Hill. A substantial house nestles in the valley, surrounded by mature trees and small fields. Wooded hills form the horizon and views are enclosed by the irregular landform and mature trees.*

## Summary Characteristics

- Underlying geology of Cretaceous Lower Greensand, known locally as Ragstone. Soils are acidic and sandy.
- The Greensand forms an elevated ridge which includes the highest land in the AONB. The ridge runs east-west, forming a steep scarp on the south side, and a gentler dip slope cut by streams on the north side.
- Springs occur where the Greensand meets layers of impermeable clay. They feed small ponds and streams running north into the Darent or south into the River Eden.
- Extensive woodland cover (deciduous and mixed) as well as wood pasture, common, parkland, hedgerows and in-field trees create a well-wooded landscape.
- Dominant land uses are woodland and pasture, with areas of parkland, grassland, common and orchard. An intricate pattern of irregular-shaped hedged fields has been carved out from surrounding woodland.
- Extensive areas of semi-natural habitat, including woodland, heath, common, wood pasture, parkland and acid grassland.
- A concentration of historic houses set in landscaped grounds, including Ightham Mote, Knowle and Chartwell (home of Sir Winston Churchill). Strong association with the National Trust.
- Low density of settlement, with dispersed villages set around village greens and commons, or in linear patterns along roads.
- Network of historic lanes and tracks running east-west along the ridge (including Greensand Way) and following north-south valleys. Many are narrow and sunken.
- Trees create a sense of intimacy and enclosure, and also seasonal change, with spectacular autumn woodland colours and spring blossom in orchards.
- Historic houses and parks are popular with visitors, and give the area a strong sense of history.
- Splendid panoramic views out across the lower land to the north and south, with official viewpoint at Toy's Hill.
- The Greensand Ridge forms the backdrop to surrounding lower land.





*Sketch of Sevenoaks Greensand Ridge from 'The Kent Downs Landscape' (1995)*

## 12.1 Description

- 12.1.1 The ridge around Sevenoaks is the product of the underlying acidic sandstone, which in the south rises up from the clay vale of the Low Weald in a steep, tree-covered south-facing scarp between Crockham Hill and Shipbourne. Offering spectacular panoramic views south towards the High Weald and Tonbridge, the greensand belt reaches over 245m at Toys Hill. Its gentler north-facing dip-slope is scored by a series of deeply cut valleys formed by spring-fed streams, and have long views across to the chalk scarp on the far side of the Darent Valley and Kemsing Vale. East of Sevenoaks, Seal Chart forms a parallel second ridge to the north, which is densely wooded.
- 12.1.2 Much of the Greensand Ridge is covered by dense, mixed woodland, producing an intimate, secretive landscape, shaded by swathes of beech, oak and conifer forest. There are also areas of coppice woodland formerly used for charcoal burning and hopping. The poor soils of the sandstone, however, discouraged early settlers and, while the river valleys and fertile vales of Kent had been settled for centuries, this area remained dense forest interspersed with occasional summer pastures until the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Centuries. The use of the area for wood pasture is likely to have continued until around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Today, the dominant characteristics of the landscape are still the thick woodland and heathy commons. The commons contain a range of semi-natural habitats, including woodland, remnant wood pasture, grassland and pockets of heath. There are numerous areas of common, each with a unique history and combination of habitats.
- 12.1.3 Between the woodland and commons are pockets of farmland. Some of the farmland areas are historic assarts (fields cleared from woodland in the medieval period) with irregular-shaped fields. The area is exceptional for its number of estates and commons, but their landscapes and management differ markedly. Estates include Knole Park (originally a medieval deer park), Ightham Mote (14<sup>th</sup> Century moated manor house), Chartwell (family home of Sir Winston Churchill, set in gardens), Fairlawne (a 17<sup>th</sup> Century house) and Squerryes Court (a William and Mary period house in an 18<sup>th</sup> Century landscaped park). Some estates are now owned by the National Trust, whilst others are in private ownership. Estate features such as parkland trees, avenues, towers, lodges, estate cottages and farms are a key part of the landscape.

- 12.1.4 Several settlements have developed along the edges of the commons. These are characterised by their low density linear patterns along roads, village greens, and open land within villages. Many have an older core of vernacular buildings surrounded by more modern development which is generally of similar materials. There are numerous farms and oast houses throughout the area, as well as some isolated dwellings built before post-war planning control. The main town of Sevenoaks is located on the north-facing slope of the Greensand Ridge, but is outside the AONB. Lanes are narrow and winding, and are often sunken. The Greensand Way wends its way along paths and tracks following the east-west ridge, linking estates and commons, and providing excellent elevated views to the north and south.
- 12.1.5 The acid greensand provides a variety of sandstones, which have been quarried since pre-Roman times and are often referred-to as 'Greensand' or 'Ragstone'. This abundance of stone has given rise to an alternative name for the area - the Chartland. *Chart* derives from the Scandinavian *kartr* meaning stony ground and still occurs in several place names, such as Brasted Chart. Historically, the Greensand was widely used for construction and road surfacing, and can still be seen in buildings throughout and beyond the Landscape Character Area, including Knole House and Ightham Mote. Oldbury stone was used on a smaller scale, notably in the village of the same name west of Borough Green. There are several stone quarries (both active and redundant) including caves, and there are quarry scars on the south-facing scarp. One example of a former quarry is Westerham Mines SSSI at Hosey Common, a valuable roost for overwintering bats, and an autumn bat swarming area. Occasionally examples of dressed Greensand may be seen, but more frequently it is irregularly coursed and packed with smaller stones. Greensand is not the only locally-available construction material. There are excellent examples of timber-framed buildings utilising the magnificent oak trees, as well as warm red bricks, clay rooftiles and hung tiles made with local clay.



*Medieval oak-framed house with tiled roof near Plaxtol*

## 12.2 Local Character Areas

- 12.2.1 There are two Local Character Areas, reflecting the slightly different characteristics of the landscape to the east and west of Sevenoaks. The Westerham Greensand has a more densely wooded character, whereas the Ightham Greensand is more influenced by wood pasture and orchards. It also has a larger proportion of land in estate ownership.

### **Westerham Greensand**

- 12.2.2 The Westerham Greensand rises gently up from the Darent Valley in the north to its highest points along the southern scarp, such as Toys Hill and Goathurst Common. Many of these areas are owned by the National Trust or are Common Land open to public access. This is an area of dense woodland, where thickets of birch and gorse are interspersed by tall stands of beech, conifer plantations or old chestnut coppice. These woodlands enclose the landscape, concealing the small lanes which criss-cross the area and hiding the sinuous pastures which line the valley sides or bottoms. The woodland is a dominant and distinct element which runs down into wide shaws around managed pastures, accentuating the landform. The intensity of land use is relatively low, and there is much ecological value in the widespread acid woodland and grasslands. Larger fields are often edged by thick strips of mature trees or dark walls of woodland. In some cases their old internal hedges have been removed or replaced by fences, gradually opening-up small areas of the landscape. Scattered farms hug the sheltered valleys throughout this area and many substantial modern houses are often surrounded by pony paddocks.
- 12.2.3 The present A25 follows an old, important route along the northern edge of the greensand, skirting both the dense woodlands and the muddy river valley. Between Limpsfield and Sevenoaks, a number of estates developed along this route, including Squerryes Court and Valence Park (now a school) which was landscaped by Capability Brown. Their associated parklands, dotted with specimen oaks and sweet chestnut trees, still influence this area. There is a strong time-depth to the landscape with highway routes following ancient trackways, and the use of vernacular materials (ragstone, brick and hung tile) in historic common-edge settlements. A much older occupation site may be found at the Iron Age hillfort north of Crockham Hill Common. The area around Ide Hill is associated with Octavia Hill, the founder of the National Trust. Winston Churchill lived at Chartwell and is said to have 'bought Chartwell for that view'. Dramatic views from the Greensand ridge remain an important characteristic of the area
- 12.2.4 The southern boundary of this area is formed by the dramatic scarp, which drops down to the extensive pasturelands of the Low Weald. The woodlands which characteristically clothe these slopes are predominantly deciduous. They suffered extensive damage in the 1987 storm, in particular along the top of the slopes, and many of the trees are relatively young. There are examples of trees which have fallen, but with enough root intact to enable the trees to re-sprout, so horizontal branches become vertical trunks.
- 12.2.5 The eastern part of the area is affected by the urban edge of Sevenoaks, the A21 and occasional pockets of discordant development which create detracting features and elements in an otherwise coherent, tranquil and distinctive landscape.





*Hosey Hill, a typical example of a common-edge settlement, with houses spread along roads around a large open space. The village has a strong wooded setting, but there are glimpsed views of the chalk scarp on the far side of the Darent Valley.*

### **Ightham Greensand**

- 12.2.6 East of Sevenoaks, the Greensand Ridge retains its densely wooded appearance, but gradually descends from the heights of Toys Hill and Goathurst Common towards the lower land around Ightham. This is an historic landscape with notable ancient landmarks and characteristic historic settlements and routeways. It has a higher proportion of parkland, acid grassland, orchards and wood pasture than the Westerham Greensand, giving a strong sense of time-depth. Small irregular pastures nestle between the trees, and the narrow, sunken lanes wind between dense stands of conifers and birch. Sometimes the trees meet across the lanes, creating ‘tunnel’ effects with walls of fern-rich banks.
- 12.2.7 The steep, wooded scarp softens out into a series of gentle slopes in the east, opening up the landscape and signalling a change in land use. Traditionally, the eastern part of the LCA has been used for fruit growing, and there is still a richly patterned landscape of apple, cherry and pear orchards around Ightham and Plaxtol. Rows of poplars or alders provide shelter from wind and frost, and turn tiny country lanes into deep enclosed corridors. In a few remaining pockets, cobnut groves or *plats* still remain, their unpruned gnarled, twiggy trunks contrasting with the more managed appearance of apple and pear trees elsewhere. In recent years some orchards have been removed and replaced with arable fields. The character of the landscape is also locally influenced by the large estates of Fairlawne (private) and Ightham Mote (National Trust). Fairlawne has a particularly well-managed (sometimes almost manicured) appearance.
- 12.2.8 Along the eastern boundary of Sevenoaks, sweeps of pasture between heathy woodland in the historic parkland of Knole House form the largest and most important area of unimproved acid grassland in Kent. The mix of oak, beech and sweet chestnut woodlands continues beyond the park as far as Seal Chart. The variety of tree cover, hedgerow and parkland provides a strong ecological

base, and the woodland edge is a feature within most views. It visually reinforces the high proportion of woodland in the area.

- 12.2.9 At the centre of Knole Park is a Jacobean remodelling of a medieval archbishop's palace, which dates back to 1456. It later became a royal possession and Henry VIII hunted here. The sika deer inhabiting the park are direct descendants of Tudor deer. Knole House and park are owned by the National Trust and popular with visitors. Knole Park and Fawke Common is a SSSI and contains a number of rare plants, animal and insect species within grassland, parkland, woodland and wetland habitats. These include nationally scarce fungi, lichen, beetles and other insects. Impressive anthills created by Yellow Meadow Ants dot the grassland, and have been distinctive features of Knole Park for centuries. Nearby Bitchet Common, Seal Chart and Redhill Wood are also SSSIs.



*Deer graze in wood pasture at Knole Park, one of the largest acid grassland SSSI in Kent*





*Cave at Hosey Common, thought to have originated as a Greensand quarry. Now a nature reserve and designated SSSI as a bat habitat*



*Greensand used in building at Plaxtol Church*



*Traditional cobnut plat near Plaxtol*



*Ightham Mote, constructed of local greensand and oak.*



*A typical scene near Westerham, with woodland largely enclosing the view*



*View south over the Low Weald from the top of the Greensand Ridge near Crockham Hill Common*



## 12.3 Landscape Condition, Sensitivities and Forces for Change

- 12.3.1 The Sevenoaks Greensand Ridge was severely affected by the 1987 storm, with many trees lost, and this was still very apparent in the landscape when the 1995 Assessment was published. Other matters of concern mentioned in the 1995 Assessment include the threats to historic parkland, loss of hedges in areas of arable cultivation and the impacts of quarrying, especially if screening vegetation is lost. The 2004 Assessment identified the entire Landscape Character Area as being in very good condition, and a strongly unified landscape with few visual detractors. The main concerns at this time were enlargement of villages and ridge-top development – concerns which remain. There is strong pressure for residential development throughout the LCA, in part because of the proximity of good rail services to London.
- 12.3.2 Today, the relatively high proportion of the land in estate ownership (including extensive areas of National Trust land) means that much of the land is well-managed. However, there are localised issues of suburbanisation of the deeply rural character, and the threats identified in earlier Assessments remain active. There are also positive land management projects, including schemes to promote public access, awareness and habitat management of commons. It is notable that managed sites, open spaces and quiet rural roads are experiencing considerable and growing levels of visitor numbers. Increased numbers of visitors are creating pressure for new car parks and enlarged facilities, and raising concerns that the visitor experience may be diminished.



*View from the A25 towards Fuller's Hill in 1995 (above) and 2017 (below)*

<b>Issue</b>	<b><i>Landscape sensitivities and potential landscape impacts</i></b>
Loss/ neglect of historic parkland	The character of parkland is threatened by tree disease, storm damage, neglect, small-scale development and alternative land uses (such as golf courses). Although there has been extensive replanting since the storm of 1987, parkland trees reaching over-maturity are not always being replaced.
Management of woodland and commons	Woodland and common land is key to the character of this area, and contains a wide variety of semi-natural habitats. Habitats such as heather, grassland and wood pasture require active management through grazing or cutting, and will become woodland if they are not managed. Loss of heathland and wood pasture will result in loss of habitat for insects, butterflies and birds. Coppiced woodland also requires regular management, and is beneficial for woodland bird species. There are issues with invasive species such as rhododendron in some woodlands. Ongoing projects to manage commons are a positive force for change.
Climate change and natural forces	Trees are vulnerable to a range of tree diseases, with Ash Dieback currently a particular concern. Climate change is likely to impact on tree species in a variety of different ways. For example, beech is relatively intolerant to drought, so is likely to suffer if summers become hotter and drier. Trees are also vulnerable to storm damage, with storms predicted to become more frequent and intense as a result of climate change.
Quarrying	Scattered sandstone quarries, such as Stangate Quarry near Borough Green, dot the northern edge of the greensand. The rolling landform and the cumulative effect of dense woodlands and hedges help to screen such sites from the surrounding countryside, but the loss of a single hedge or strip of woodland can expose the scar of a quarry over a long distance. Some former quarries are now landfilled and others are being developed with housing. It is anticipated that there will be growing demands for minerals in the coming years with greater pressure exerted on the AONB.
New development	Development pressure is a concern across the area. Some village expansion is less well-concealed than older settlement growth, and is therefore more apparent in the landscape, particularly if it occurs on ridge tops, or is of unsympathetic materials. Gradual suburbanisation of rural lanes, particularly on the edge of villages, through (for example) suburban gateways and boundary treatments is changing the character of rural lanes in some parts of the area. There is also growing pressure to convert agricultural buildings to dwellings, and for extending/ replacing existing houses, which can impact on the character of the area.
Development within the setting of the AONB	The area around Sevenoaks (and the lower land to the north) is facing particular development pressure. Development taking place outside the AONB boundary but within the setting of the AONB may impact on the much valued long views from within the AONB.
Land use change	Grubbing-up of orchards changes the texture, appearance and seasonal cycles of the landscape. Past loss of hedgerows in arable areas has led to erosion of the landscape pattern. Use of farmland for horse grazing/ stabling is an additional change, as is encroachment of residential land uses onto former pasture land or woodland adjacent to dwellings. The new Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) offers opportunities to restore and reinforce valued characteristics of the landscape.
Traffic and impacts on local lanes	Local roads and lanes are becoming more congested. In places the verges / banks are being damaged by large vehicles, causing a loss of their historic character.



<i>Issue</i>	<i>Landscape sensitivities and potential landscape impacts</i>
Damage to archaeological sites	Archaeological sites in woodland are particularly vulnerable to damage by tree roots, bracken and scrub growth as well as inappropriate woodland management practices. Large prehistoric sites at Crockham Hill and Oldbury are largely concealed by dense woodland.



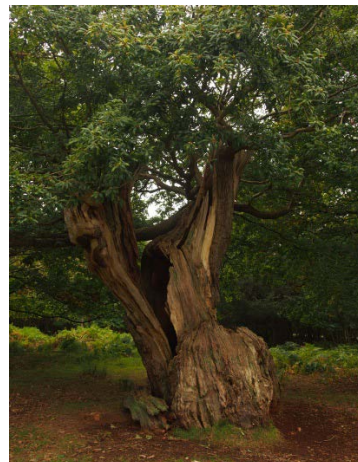
*Recently grubbed-up and ploughed orchard. The dark stains are ash from the burning of orchard trees.*



*Lime tree blown over in the 1987 storm which has re-sprouted, with new trunks growing from former branches.*



*Invasive rhododendron on Hosey Common*



*Veteran tree, Knole Park*



*Active management on Crockham Hill Common has promoted heathland habitat*



*Well-managed grazed parkland in the Fairlawne estate near Plaxtol.*

## 12.4 Landscape Management Recommendations

### Aspirational Landscape Strategy

The distinctive character of the Greensand Ridge is recognised and valued by visitors and the local community. The woodlands, parklands and commons are well managed and popular with visitors, and support a diverse range of habitats and species. Visitor pressure is managed in such a way that the character and qualities of the area are not diminished. The range of historic buildings - from grand country houses to traditional farmsteads - are protected and enjoyed within their historic landscape settings. Orchards and cobnut plots continue to be a feature of the landscape and contribute to its pattern and sense of place. The settlements retain their distinctive character and form, and any new development is carefully integrated into the landscape, avoiding prominent locations. Lanes retain their rural character and are not suburbanised by highways works or incongruous property boundaries. The impact of main roads is reduced and highway treatments are more sympathetic to their context. There are opportunities to appreciate the views over the Darent Valley, Kemsing Vale and Low Weald. Any development outside the AONB has minimal impact on views. The tranquil characteristics of the area are conserved.

#### Protect

- Protect the undeveloped, tranquil and historic rural character of the area.
- Protect the distinctive horizons, particularly the top of the scarp, avoiding development and other structures which would impact on views from the surrounding area.
- Protect distinctive village forms and open character.
- Protect historic buildings and their settings, and the special character of villages and farmsteads.
- Protect archaeological sites, particularly those in woodland, to minimise damage from tree roots, bracken and scrub.

#### Manage

- Manage parkland and wood pasture, encouraging the production of Parkland Management Plans, and the planting of replacement parkland trees which will continue to be a feature in the landscape for future generations. Manage grassland areas through appropriate grazing/ cutting to enhance the diversity of flora and supported species. Conserve ancient and veteran trees.
- Manage woodland, including traditional management techniques such as coppicing, pollarding and if appropriate undergrazing, to achieve age and species diversity and a diversity of ground flora. Remove invasive species such as rhododendron. Reinforce wooded edges to existing settlements and farmed areas.
- Consider the diversification of woodlands using appropriate native species to provide resilience to climate change and tree disease.
- Promote new hedgerow / roadside trees from existing hedge stock. Also retain and manage hedgerows along narrow, vergeless lanes.
- Manage common land, maintaining and enhancing the diversity of habitats (including heath, woodland and acid grassland) which exist within the extensive common land in this Landscape Character Area. Promote sensitive public awareness and access to the commons, and encourage management through community projects for the benefit of future generations.
- Manage orchards and cobnut plots, identifying new commercial markets for local produce to keep growing viable.



- Manage agricultural land, encouraging the replanting of lost hedgerows and the planting or promotion of hedgerow and in-field trees and shaws to strengthen landscape structure and act as habitat links.
- Manage watercourses and work with landowners and the Environment Agency to promote healthy watercourses free from pollution and invasive species.
- Manage the highway infrastructure in a way which respects and reinforces the rural context. Maintain verges/ banks, passing places, drains and ditches. Conserve the routes and characteristics of the Greensand drove roads.

#### Plan

- Develop planning guidance for gateways and property boundaries to encourage schemes which are in keeping with the rural character of the area and do not contribute to suburbanisation.
- Ensure any new development is well-integrated into the landscape (using tree, woodland and hedgerow planting) and on a suitable scale. Consider the wooded settings to settlements, and enhance them where possible. Avoid development on ridge tops or in prominent positions on the scarp and ensure that any new small-scale development does not intrude on long views. Encourage use of distinctive local materials including ragstone, brick, weatherboarding and tile.
- Raise awareness of the area and its character amongst local people and the wider public, and encourage those who visit and explore the area to do so in a way with minimises their impact. This could be done through outreach to people visiting popular National Trust sites (Ightham Mote, Knole, Chartwell etc.) and local commons.
- Investigate opportunities to enable views over the surrounding area. Where viewpoints already exist, manage vegetation to prevent views from becoming obscured.
- Work with Highways Authorities to increase the biodiversity value of verges and hedgerows without compromising safety.
- Within the setting of the LCA, work with Local Planning Authorities and designers to achieve the best possible landscape and ecological integration and minimal impact on views, with compensation achieved for lost qualities.
- Ensure the identified character of the LCA is used as a basis for future efforts to mitigate climate change, for instance through tree establishment.
- Ensure that quarry sites (existing and future) are directed away from the AONB and where they are approved they should be well-screened by topography and vegetation with careful restoration plans. Restoration plans must be followed.
- Encourage partnership working between different Local Authorities, agencies and community groups to enable seamless working across the AONB. Consider environmental/ landscape limits in planning and plan making.