

14.0 Eden Valley Low Weald

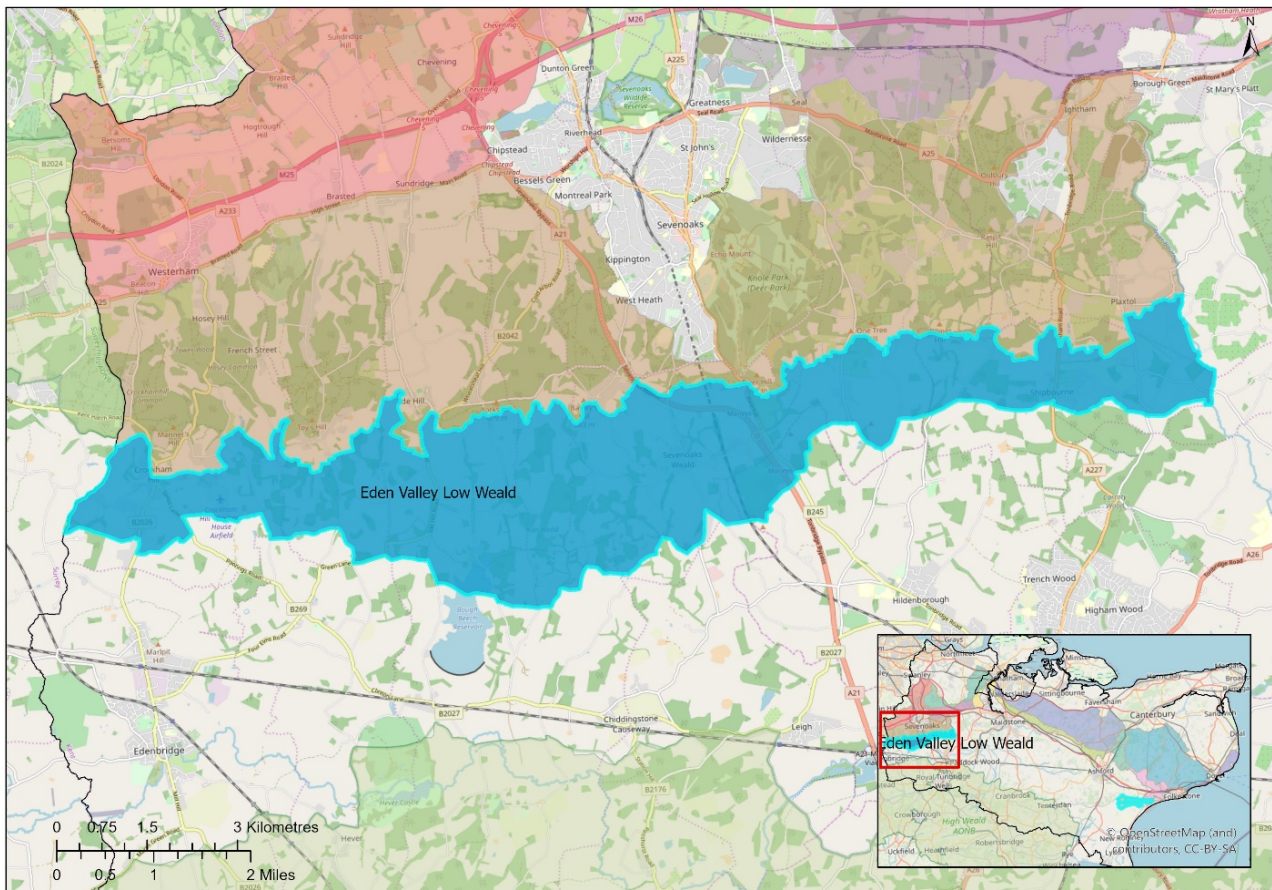
Landscape Character Area 6A

Landscape Character Type 6: Low Weald

Districts/ Boroughs: Sevenoaks; Tonbridge and Malling

Landscape/Countryside Partnerships: North West Kent Countryside Partnership

Location and Context: This LCA is located in the far south-west of the Kent Downs AONB, to the south of the Sevenoaks Greensand Ridge LCA. It extends from Crockham Hill in the west to Dunk's Green in the east, and includes several settlements including Sevenoaks Weald and Shipbourne.



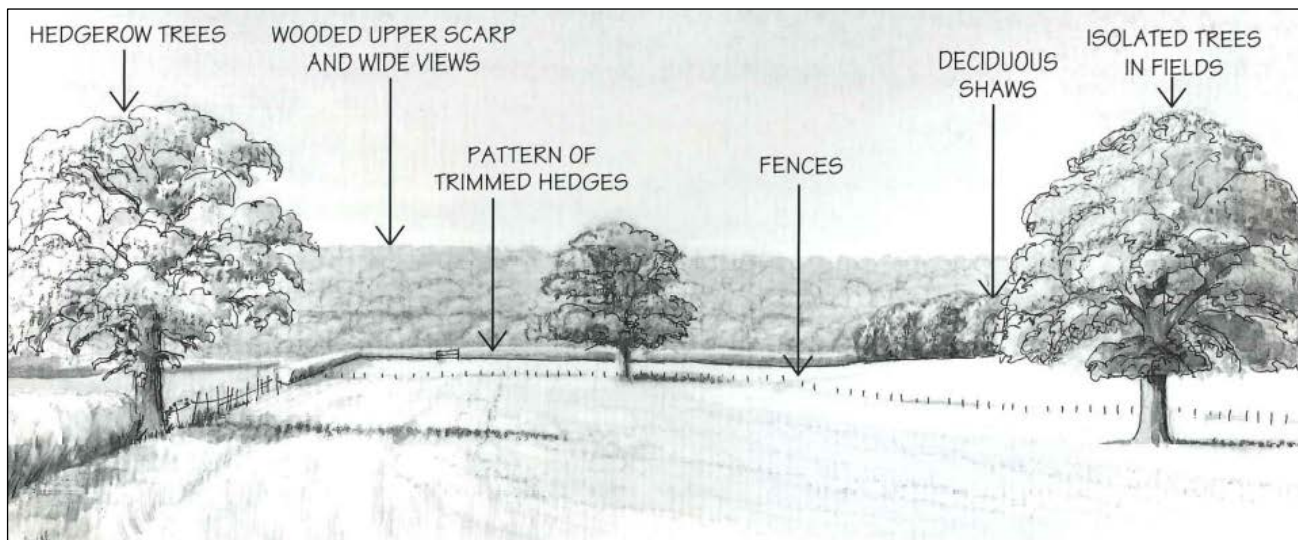
Location map for Eden Valley Low Weald LCA



A typical view within the Eden Valley Low Weald, near the foot of the Greensand Scarp. The Greensand Scarp forms a backdrop to a patchwork of irregular fields divided by hedgerows and trees.

Summary Characteristics

- Underlying geology of Weald clay, creating sticky, damp clay soils.
- An undulating landform, which gradually slopes south from the Greensand Ridge in the north to the valley of the River Eden in the south.
- A series of streams flow south, forming tributaries of the River Eden. There are valley-floor wetlands, streams and ponds, and extensive open water at Bough Beech Reservoir.
- Deciduous woodland blocks, copses, hedgerows and infield trees create an impression of a densely-treed landscape. Oak trees are traditionally associated with this LCA.
- Land use is primarily pastoral agriculture, although there is some arable land use. Field patterns vary, but are generally small and irregular, divided by hedgerows.
- Semi-natural habitats include woodlands, wetlands, streams and mature oak trees.
- An ancient and long-settled landscape, with historic features such as lanes, farms, woodlands and field patterns unchanged in centuries.
- Lightly settled, with scattered farms and small villages. Villages are often arranged around commons or greens. Numerous historic buildings constructed from local timber, stone and clay.
- Lanes tend to run north-south, and often wind between high banks.
- Irregular fields divided by hedgerows create a patchwork pattern in the landscape.
- Much of the LCA has a strong sense of time-depth, and a feeling of tranquillity and detachment from modern life.
- The Greensand Ridge to the north forms a wooded backdrop to views from within the LCA. There are spectacular views across this LCA from the Greensand Ridge.



Sketch of Eden Valley Low Weald from 'The Kent Downs Landscape' (1995)

14.1 Description

- 14.1.1 The Eden Valley Low Weald Landscape Character Area comprises the undulating clay vale to the south of the Sevenoaks Greensand Ridge. It extends from Crockham Hill in the west to Plaxtol in the east, and has a sense of peacefulness and of being less visited than other parts of the Kent Downs AONB.
- 14.1.2 The Low Weald is more open and pastoral than the extensively-wooded Greensand Ridge. However, the landscape still contains numerous small woods, trees, copses, shaws and often well treed hedgerows which combine to give the landscape a deceptively densely-wooded appearance. Although there are pockets of arable cultivation, the heavy wet clay favours grassland, and the dominant land use is irregular grazed fields, separated by hedgerows. These produce distinctive patchwork field patterns across the gentle slopes. There are also areas of estate parkland, particularly towards the east.
- 14.1.3 Small springs, seeping out from between the upper layers of Greensand, have cut a series of deep furrows in the scarp, which continue through the Low Weald before draining eventually into the flat Eden Valley in the south. The Low Weald is unusual within the Kent Downs AONB in that it contains surface water in the form of numerous springs, ponds and streams, as well as Bough Beech Reservoir (constructed 1969-70).
- 14.1.4 The clays of the Low Weald traditionally produced good oak trees, which were extensively used to construct the timber-framed buildings so typical of this area. Nevertheless, the underlying ragstone was also widely used for building and combinations of these materials, along with brick and tile, are not unusual. Cottages often have low sloping roofs, and larger buildings sometimes exhibit eighteenth or nineteenth century frontages. Settlement is sparse. There are occasional scattered farms, hamlets and manor houses, but otherwise settlement is concentrated in the villages of Sevenoaks Weald, Shipbourne and Crockham Hill. With the exception of the more recently-constructed parts of Sevenoaks Weald, all three of these villages have a dispersed form, with Shipbourne's houses, church and pub scattered around its large central common. Roads are generally narrow and hedge-lined, but there are also some lanes with wide verges which would have been used for moving animals. There are numerous north-south routes, but fewer east-west.

14.1.5 The dramatic, wooded bulk of the Greensand Ridge dominates the northern horizon in many views from within the Low Weald. However, much of the area has a sense of enclosure due to the many small woodlands and hedgerows. There are spectacular views across the Low Weald from the top of the Greensand Ridge. These views stretch away to the High Weald AONB, south of Tonbridge, across a seemingly-unspoilt mosaic of small-scale farmland and trees.



Hedgerow Oak with the Greensand Ridge visible behind, Ightham Estate (National Trust)



Bough Beech Reservoir, with low water levels



Traditional Oast House, formerly the Bough Beech Visitor Centre



Shipbourne: A common-edge village



View from Ide Hill looking south across the Low Weald towards the High Weald

14.2 Landscape Condition, Sensitivities and Forces for Change

- 14.2.1 The 1995 Assessment notes that the condition of heritage features is generally good, and that the landscape retains its functional integrity. There are some concerns about vegetative heritage features (e.g. mature hedgerows) due to over-maturity and lack of long-term management objectives. Other issues mentioned are isolated trees resulting from hedgerow loss, and subdivision of fields into horse paddocks using temporary fencing. The vulnerability of trees and hedgerows is also raised in the 2004 and subsequent assessments, but overall the 2004 Assessment considers the landscape to be in very good condition across the Low Weald Landscape Character Area. The landscape is considered to be strongly unified, with a clear landscape pattern and a strong network of field boundaries and small woodlands linked with streams and pastures. The diversity of connected habitats provides a robust ecological network, and there are very few detracting features in the landscape.
- 14.2.2 This is still the case today. The landscape retains its unity and pattern, its strong sense of place and its ecological networks. There are a few poorly designed or sited farm buildings, but generally the landscape contains few detracting features. In the east of the area, a significant proportion of the farmland is in estate ownership (the National Trust and the Fairlawne estate) and has consistent management. However, as in all landscapes there are forces for change (outlined in the table below) and this small-scale, intensely rural landscape is likely to be particularly affected by future changes in agricultural practices, which are currently unknown, but are likely to be largely driven by economics. The mature trees and hedgerows remain vulnerable to over-maturity and loss, particularly if they are no longer required for stock management.



(previous page) View north from near Scollops Farm (north of Bough Beech Reservoir) in 1995 (above) and 2017 (below) The main change is the re-growth of woodland on the scarp slope and ridge, which was severely impacted by the great storm of 1987.

Issue	<i>Landscape sensitivities and potential landscape impacts</i>
Changing land management practices	<p>Recent years have seen conversion of some pasture to arable, as a consequence of the wider decline in mixed farming and dairy farming. This in turn reduces the need for stockproof hedgerows, and indeed for any hedgerows, as machines are generally easier to operate in larger fields. Redundant hedgerows and hedgerow trees are less likely to be managed or retained. Although hedgerow loss is noted as an issue in earlier assessments, it is unlikely that further hedgerows have been actively removed since then.</p> <p>Diversification of farmland is also a force for change. Again, subdivision of fields for horse paddocks was a concern in earlier assessments, but although there are still some examples of this, they are not frequent, and it may be that the peak demand for new paddocks has passed.</p> <p>Orchards and hop gardens have now largely disappeared from the landscape. Very few working oast houses remain, although many have been converted into residences.</p> <p>Changes to farming practices and land ownership towards fewer, larger, farms mean that there are likely to be changes in the buildings required. Already there are examples of large-scale farm buildings, and more of these are likely to be needed.</p> <p>The new Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) offers opportunities to restore and reinforce valued characteristics of the landscape.</p> <p>The introduction of pony paddocks and other recreational land management, (such as golf) whilst not widespread, is occasionally a detractor where the management practice or siting of stables does not take into account landscape conservation.</p>
Loss of trees and woodland	<p>Tree disease is a major risk in this Area. As mentioned above, a move from livestock to arable farming reduces the need for hedgerows and hedgerow trees, making them vulnerable to neglect and loss.</p> <p>Field and parkland trees may also be lost from the landscape if they are not managed or replaced.</p> <p>Loss of trees, hedgerows and woodland also affect the ecological connectivity of the landscape.</p> <p>At the same time the introduction of non-native species in hedgerows and parklands can appear incongruous in a landscape which otherwise shows considerable unity.</p>
Climate change and natural forces	<p>The clay soils of the Low Weald are susceptible to both drought and flooding, and the risk of both is likely to increase as a result of climate change. These will both impact on the types of tree species able to flourish in the area, for example alder may decline if groundwater levels are reduced.</p> <p>Tree disease such as Ash Dieback, Processionary Moth and Phytophthora (which affect oak trees) are a major concern, as these trees are so key to the character of the Low Weald.</p>

Issue	Landscape sensitivities and potential landscape impacts
Changes to buildings and settlements	Conversion of redundant farm buildings to other uses risks undermining their character. There is a risk that the character of built form is lost through small-scale development and suburbanisation.
Infrastructure	The A21, access roundabouts and roads have localised impact on the landscape, and on tranquillity, but this is limited by the road being largely in a cutting. At certain times there is also an awareness of aircraft noise related to Gatwick Airport which significantly reduces the tranquillity of the area.



The proportion of arable land in the Low Weald has increased in recent years due to the wider decline in dairy and mixed farming



Line of isolated field trees following hedgerow removal



A large farm building constructed of unsympathetic materials in a prominent elevated location



An example of positive management - a well maintained and locally-distinctive signpost, which contributes to the impression of a cared-about landscape.

14.3 Landscape Management Recommendations

Aspirational Landscape Strategy

The landscape retains its small-scale enclosure pattern, unified landscape structure and lack of incongruous features. The mosaic of fields, woodlands, hedgerows, trees and riverside vegetation are retained, renewed and continue to provide a strong network of habitats.

Farming continues within the existing field pattern, with farmers supported in their efforts to retain the traditional appearance of the landscape. Should new farm buildings be necessary, they are carefully sited and designed to have minimal impact on the wider landscape.

The sparse settlement pattern and distinctive built form of villages around greens and commons is retained. Locally-sourced materials are used in building construction where possible.

Protect

- Protect the appearance of the Low Weald as a unified and well-structured landscape with few incongruous features.
- Protect the historic features of the landscape, including buildings, farmsteads, lanes and field patterns.
- Protect the distinctive forms and settings of villages, including greens and commons, and the distinctive building materials of ragstone, brick, timber and hung-tile.
- Protect the character of rural lanes, resisting unnecessary signage and other clutter.

Manage

- Manage hedgerows and hedgerow trees (both between fields and along lanes) to retain their presence within the landscape, to provide ecological corridors between woodland areas, and to protect the landscape structure. Look to replant hedgerows where they have been lost and prepare landscape recovery plans where tree disease affects the landscape. Conserve existing, and plant new field and hedgerow oak trees.
- Manage wetland areas, streams and ponds to promote biodiversity and as a feature of the Low Weald landscape.
- Manage woodlands and copses and encourage a range of land uses within them (e.g. game cover, recreation, timber production) to promote diversity.
- Work with estate owners in the management of parklands, supporting parkland management plans and the planting of replacement parkland trees to ensure their continued presence in the landscape. Encourage retention and repair of characteristic estate boundary features such as ragstone walls, chestnut fencing and hedgerows with mature trees.

Plan

- Ensure that any development in the Low Weald Landscape Character Area is of a suitable scale, and enhances rather than dilutes the character of the area.
- Retain the sparse settlement pattern, and the integration of settlements into the landscape through sensitive tree, hedgerow and small woodland planting.
- Ensure any new development respects the rural setting and loose form of small settlements, conserving distinctive greens and commons.

- Promote best-practice in the design, siting and construction of new and converted farm buildings. Ensure that new farm buildings are integrated into the landform, and that they are constructed of visually-recessive materials, taking into account their backdrop.
- Conserve views to and from the Greensand Ridge, managing vegetation if necessary to avoid views becoming obscured.
- Work with schools and community groups to promote volunteering and the continuation of traditional Low Weald farmland skills such as hedge laying and woodland management.
- Consider raising the profile of Bough Beech Reservoir as a visitor destination (for example through a circular walk around the reservoir, and improved parking provision).
- Consider reinstating or reintroducing orchards into the landscape, perhaps as part of diversification schemes, or as planting to integrate new development.
- Promote and encourage the adoption of equine land management guidance and condition its use in planning.
- Engage in future flight path consultations to seek a reduction in over-flying.
- Work with Highways Authorities to increase the biodiversity value of verges and hedgerows without compromising safety.
- 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.
- Carefully reflect the character and qualities of the LCA in mitigation responses to climate change in particular tree establishment.
- 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 any lost qualities.