

Wealden District Council

Landscape and Visual Assessment – Appendix A.10

Potential Development Sites in the High Weald AONB: Groombridge

Final report

Prepared by LUC

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Wealden District Council

Landscape and Visual Assessment – Appendix A.10

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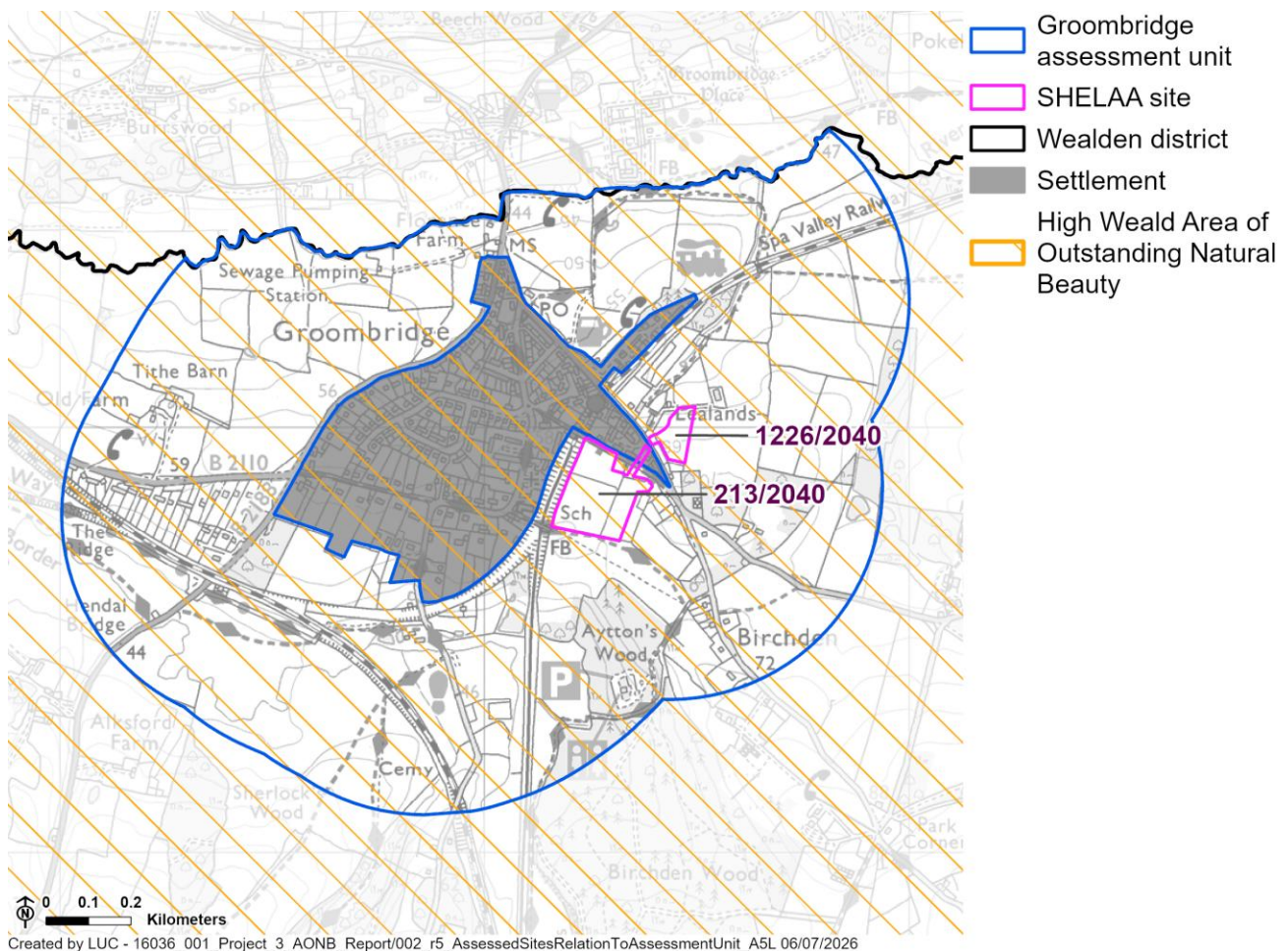
Appendix A.10

Groombridge Assessment Unit

The following potential development sites are considered within the Groombridge assessment unit:

- Land south of Back Lane and to the west of railway line (213/2040)
- The Paddock, Lealands Farm, Station Road (1226/2040)

Figure 1: Location of assessed sites in relation to the assessment unit



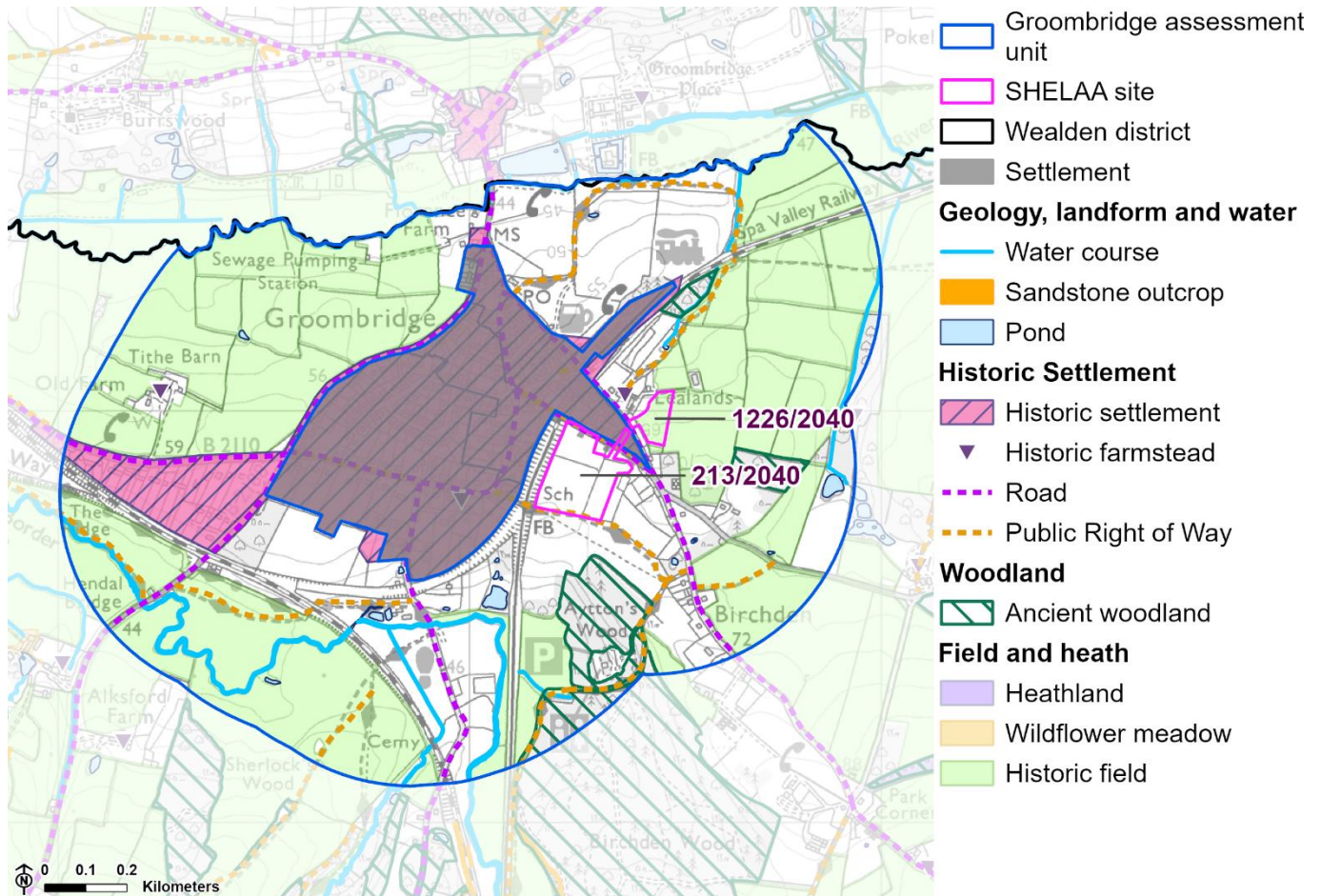
Settlement location, evolution and pattern

Settlement location and context	Groombridge is a village located in the north of Wealden district, within the High Weald AONB. The village is located within a relatively broad part of the undulating River Medway Valley and is framed by the lower-lying River Grom and Eridge Stream corridors to the north and south.
Settlement evolution	The historic core of the village is relatively linear, and situated along the B2188 (extending north of the district boundary, and designated as a Conservation Area within Tunbridge Wells Borough). The village has medieval origins as a chapelry and market town and historically several prominent families were resident in the area, including the Russells at Groombridge Place. The introduction of the railways in the 19th century resulted in modest growth of the village. Whilst the main railway line closed to passengers in 1985, the town still forms the terminus of the Spa Valley Heritage Railway.
Settlement pattern and edge character	The historic linear form of settlement was eroded by modern development in the 20th and 21st centuries, resulting in the nucleated form of the settlement present today between the B2188 and Station Road in the north and the railway to the south. This primarily consists of one and two storey detached and semi-detached houses. The village is bound by the B2188 and Station Road in the north, the wooded railway line to the south and east. Settlement is typically fringed by woodland, which is denser in the south and east, and mature field boundaries. Views looking west from the settlement edge are relatively open.

Mapped information for the core character components of natural beauty of the High Weald AONB

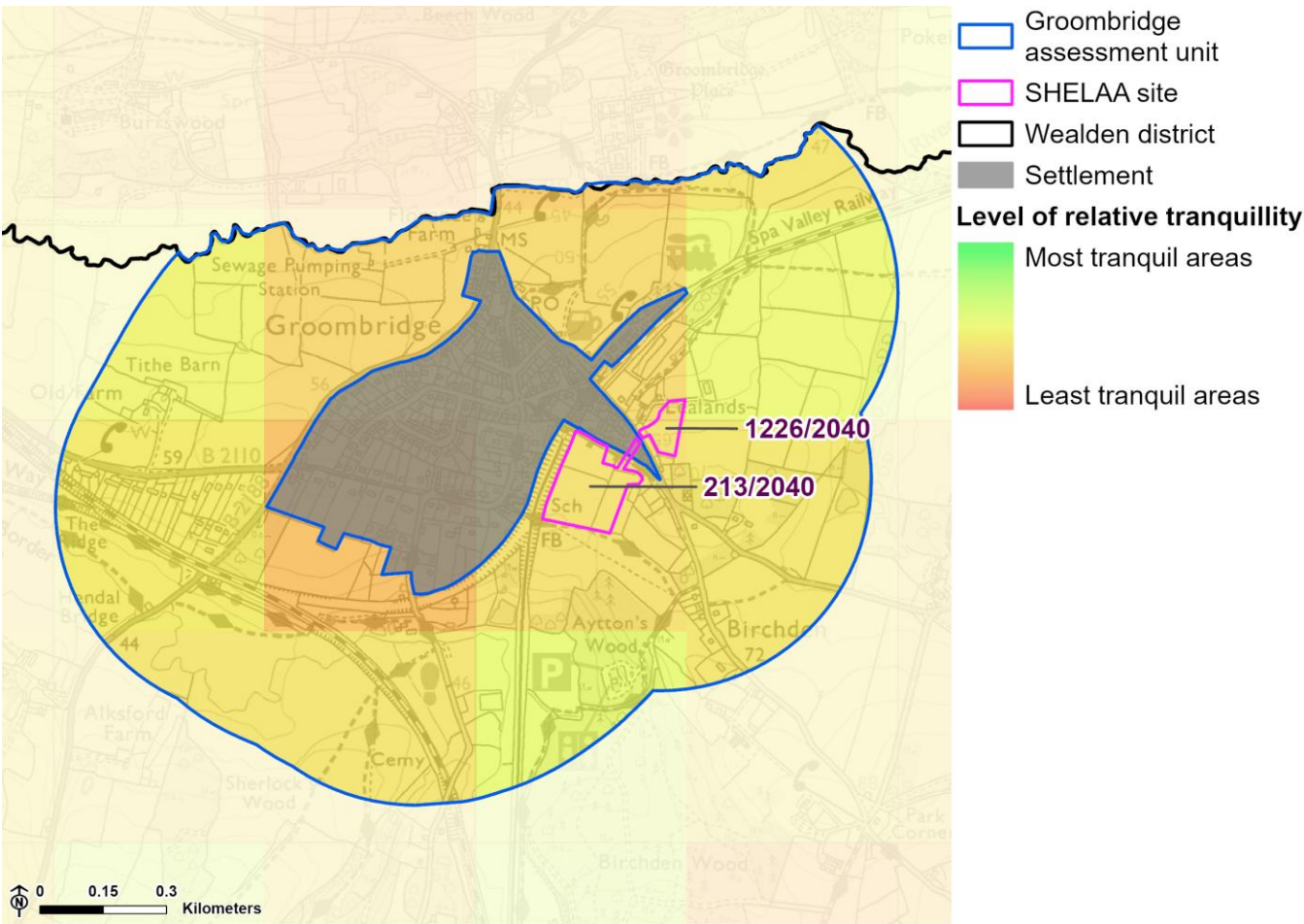
The High Weald AONB's defining components of character that are found within the Groombridge assessment unit have been mapped in **Figure 2**. Tranquillity (which forms part of the 'aesthetic and perceptual qualities' character component) and dark skies are shown in **Figures 3 and 4** respectively.

Figure 2: Core character components of natural beauty of the High Weald AONB



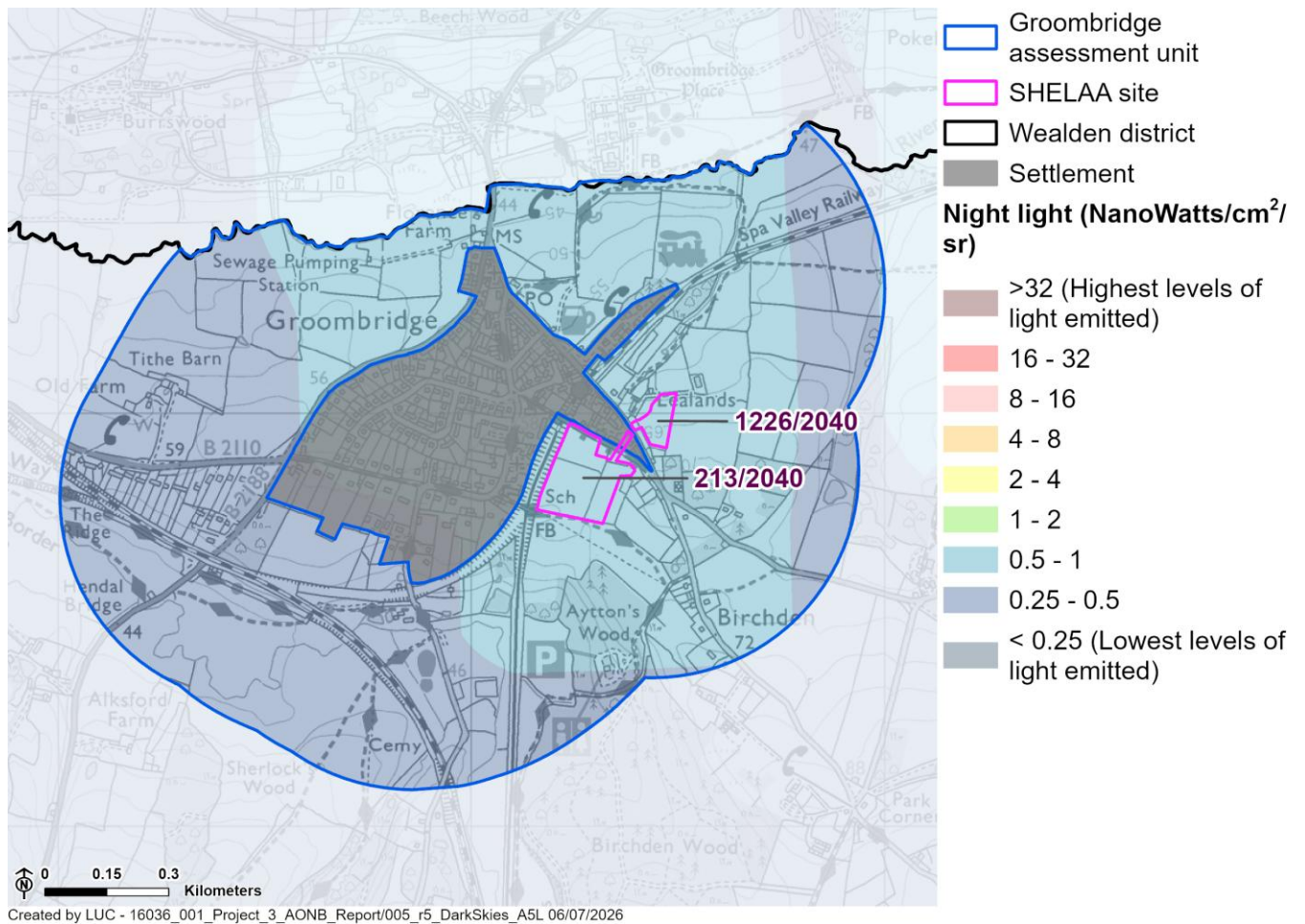
Created by LUC - 16036_001_Project_3_AONB_Report/003_r5_CoreCharacterComponentsNatBeautyAONB_A5L 06/07/2026

Figure 3: Tranquillity



Created by LUC - 16036_001_Project_3_AONB_Report/004_r5_Tranquillity_A5L 06/07/2026

Figure 4: Dark skies



Landscape sensitivity context for the Groombridge assessment unit

The landscape sensitivity of the Groombridge assessment unit, described in the <i>Wealden Landscape Sensitivity Assessment to Residential and Employment Development (2023)</i>			
Landscape sensitivity The rating that applies to the assessment unit	Small scale residential 2-2.5 storey housing	Medium scale residential 3-4 storey flats/ care homes	Commercial/ industrial e.g. industrial units or hotels
	H	H	H
Key sensitivities The key landscape sensitivities to development identified for the LSA unit	■ Complex undulating river valley landform with incised stream corridors to the north and south. ■ Small areas of deciduous woodland, some of which are ancient in origin. ■ Intact historic field pattern, particularly assarts in the west. ■ Groombridge Place Registered Park and Garden in the north. ■ The network of public rights of way, including the Forest Way Country Park, Sussex Border Path and footpaths in Birchden Wood. ■ The boundary features formed by the B2110, Station Road and the wooded current and former railway corridors, which define the settlement edge. ■ The strong rural character with areas of tranquillity and experience of dark skies, which forms the backdrop to the settlement. ■ Location within and intervisibility with areas of the High Weald AONB.		
Guidance	■ Minimise the influence of development in significant views afforded from the settlement, particularly along the B2110, looking towards the wooded ridges of the High Weald AONB and across the pastoral valley landscape. ■ Retain broadleaved woodland, including at Birchden Wood. Avoid loss of, harm, or deterioration to ancient semi-natural woodlands and allow a buffer zone around them (to avoid root damage). Replace any unavoidable losses, with native species where possible, ensuring an appropriate maintenance schedule is prepared and implemented for remedial planting. ■ Retain or replace hedgerow trees, protecting mature specimen trees from the impacts of development. Any new planting should be in character with the locality, using native species where possible. ■ Retain and where possible enhance hedgerows, and take opportunities to strengthen the local habitat network. Where there is unavoidable loss of hedgerows, mitigation / compensation in the form of suitable hedgerow replacement should be sought, using native species where possible. ■ Preserve historic field patterns, locating development away from intricate small-scale historic field patterns, particularly medieval assarts in the west. ■ Ensure development does not adversely affect the historic qualities and setting of the Groombridge Place Registered Park and Garden. ■ Consider key views from the Groombridge Conservation Area. ■ Avoid crossing the distinctive boundary features formed by the B2110, Station Road, and wooded railway lines which contain the settlement.		

- Consider views of development from popular public rights of way, including the Forest Row Country Park, Sussex Border Path and footpaths within Birchden Wood.
- Ensure opportunities to access and enjoy the landscape are preserved and enhanced.
- Any development should be carefully integrated into the landscape, utilising existing woodland, or using species that are in character with the wider landscape.
- Ensure new building reinforces and responds to local character in its scale, layout and design, reflecting the local vernacular in use of materials. Developments should draw on the principles contained within the High Weald AONB 'High Weald Housing Design Guide'¹, 'Guidance on the selection and use of colour in development'² and objectives of the High Weald AONB Management Plan³.
- Ensure development does not affect the scenic rural character of the landscape, and areas of relative tranquillity, particularly the defining components of character relating to the High Weald AONB.

¹ <https://www.highweald.org/look-after/planning/design-guide.html>

² <https://www.highweald.org/look-after/planning/colour-study.html>

³ <https://www.highweald.org/high-weald-aonb-management-plan.html>

Land south of Back Lane and to the west of railway line (213/2040)

Site Details	
Potential development	(Draft Allocation) Site 213/2040 - Residential development proposed on entirety of site mapped below, and entirety of the site is proposed as draft allocation WIT1 (identified for 21 dwellings) in the Focused Wealden Local Plan (2026)
Site location	The site is located to the south of Station Road and to the east of the former railway line, which partially forms the eastern settlement edge of Groombridge.

Figure 5: Site location and constraints

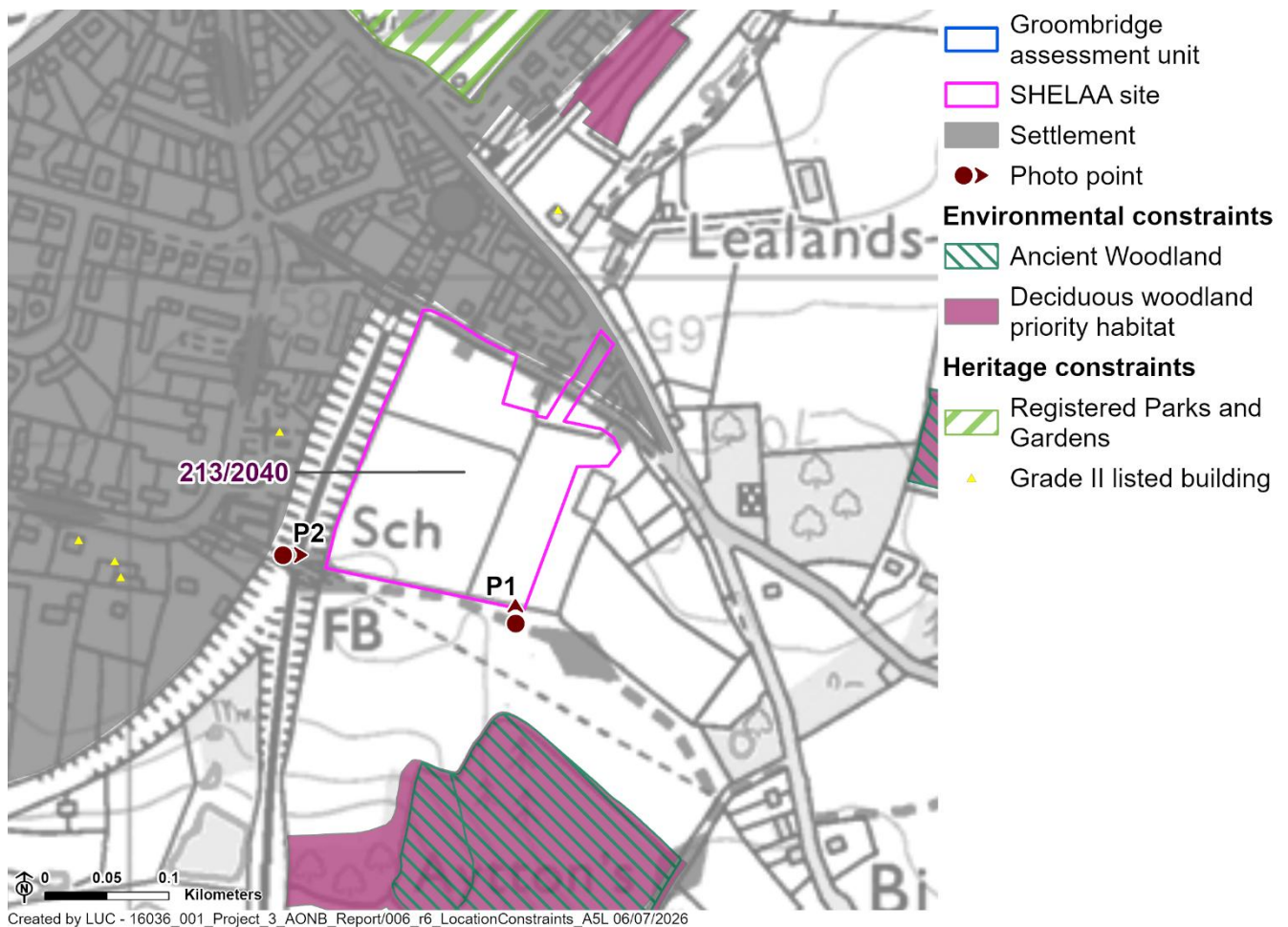
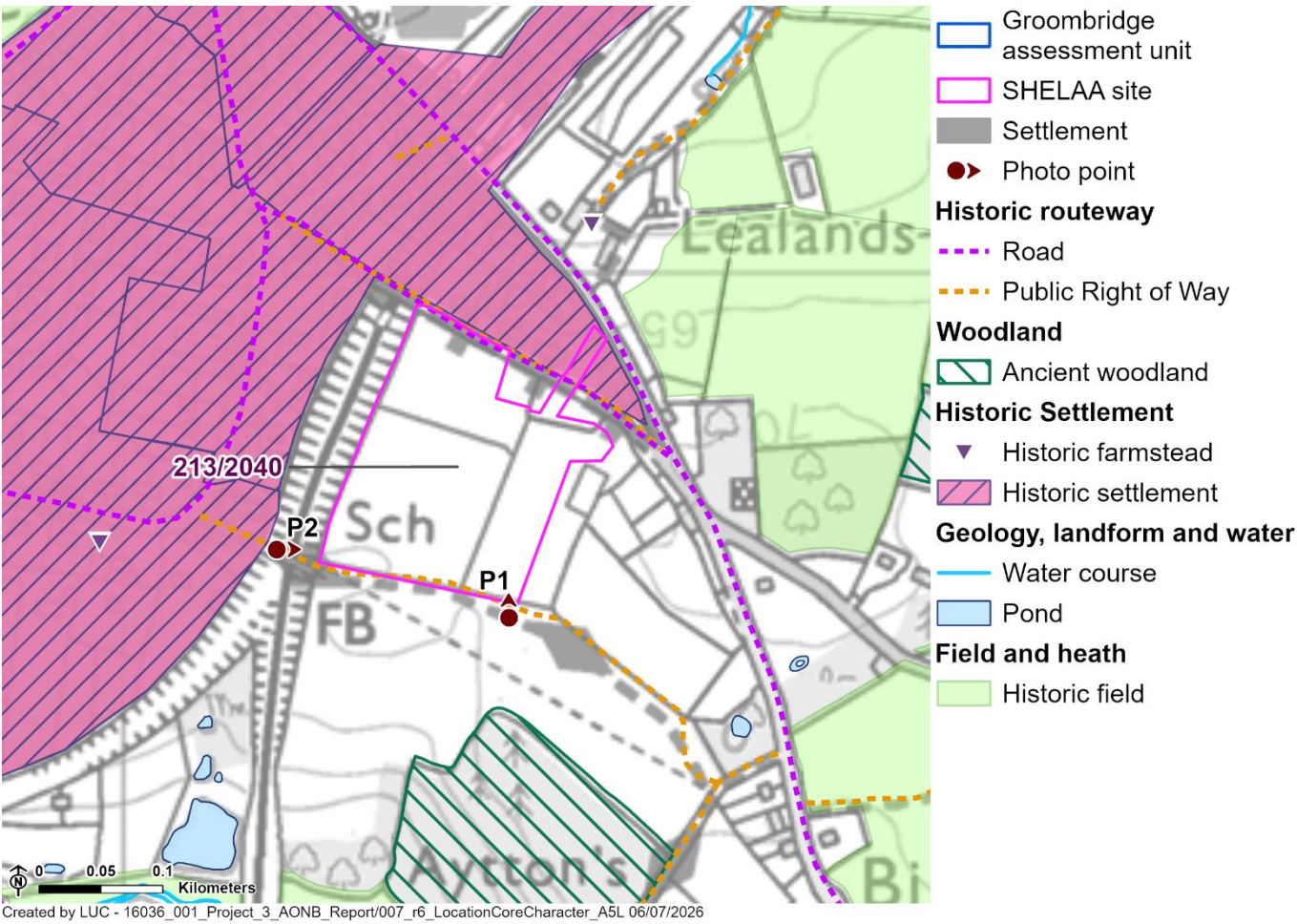


Figure 6: Site location and core character components of natural beauty of the High Weald AONB



Representative site photos



Photo 1: Subdivision of fields with post and wire fencing seen in glimpsed views looking north from the Wealdway



Photo 2: Partially screened views looking north-east towards the site from the High Weald Landscape Trail and railway bridge

Baseline Analysis

Baseline landscape character	
Key features and qualities of the site in relation to the wider assessment unit	Landform - The site is located across a relatively flat and slightly elevated area (approximately 65m AOD), located above the River Medway Valley and slightly above the surrounding settlement edge. It is surrounded by undulating topography (which is more typical of the wider assessment unit) to the north-east and south. There is a deep cutting for the railway line to the west of the site. Natural character - The site is predominantly pastoral in character, though currently used for horse paddocks, with mature and occasionally wooded hedgerows within and around the site which are typical of the wider assessment unit. Some scattered in field trees are located in the east of the site. - Proximity of residential properties and landscaped gardens, which extend to the south of the PRow/ byway (along the northern boundary of the site), exert a suburban influence and decrease the natural character in the north and north-east of the site, which is atypical of the wider assessment unit. Landscape pattern and time depth - The site is located within an area of medium scale fields derived from piecemeal enclosure (as classified in the Sussex HLC) which are typical of the wider assessment unit. Subdivision of fields with post and wire fencing for horse paddocks has influenced the internal pattern of the site. - No heritage features are recorded within the site, which is typical of the wider assessment unit. Perceptual aspects - There is a sense of rural tranquillity which is occasionally influenced by the proximity to the village (levels of tranquillity are recorded in the middle band of CPRE's Tranquillity Mapping, Figure 3). - Dark night skies are experienced from the site and wider assessment unit (light levels are recorded in the lower/darker bands of CPRE's Night Blight Mapping, Figure 4). - Due to its elevation and limited internal hedgerow boundaries, there is a sense of openness.
Settlement form and edge character and extent of built development	The site does not play a role in the separation of settlements. The site lies to the east of the settlement edge of Groombridge, and east of the railway cutting which partially forms a settlement boundary. However, there is existing development to the north of the site which extends east of the railway line along Station Road. Existing development to the north of the site comprises predominantly two storey detached residential properties with some two storey terraced properties. Existing development to the west of the site, located to the west of the railway, comprises two storey detached residential properties and a school. Woodland along the railway line forms part of a soft settlement boundary and partially screens views into the site from the west. The site sits slightly more elevated than the settlement edge.
Baseline visual character	
Potential visual receptors	The woodland along the railway line obscures views of the site from the nearby residential properties and the school located along the settlement edge to the west of

	the site. Partially screened views into the site are afforded from residential properties along Lealands Close and Station Road to the north of the site. A public right of way/ byway runs along the historic lane and passes along the northern site boundary and crosses a small part of the north-east of the site. The High Weald Landscape Trail passes along the southern site boundary. Users of these public rights of way experience glimpsed views into the site, in between breaks in vegetation. Outward views from the open access land at Aytton's Wood to the south of the site are screened by intervening woodland.
Extent of visibility within the High Weald AONB	There are some long views towards elevated wooded skylines to the north and south.

Expression of the 'core character components of natural beauty' of the High Weald AONB on the site	
Natural systems (geology, soils, water and climate) – a deeply incised, ridged and faulted landform of clays and sandstone with highly variable, relatively undisturbed soils and numerous headwaters (gill streams) functioning under an oceanic climate.	The site is located on the edge of the <u>principal ridge (Forest Ridge)</u> of the High Weald AONB, with the elevated landform contributing towards the <u>pattern of faults and folds</u> . There are no distinctive geological or water features within the site.
Settlement – dispersed historic settlement including high densities of isolated farmsteads, hamlets and late-medieval villages founded on trade and non-agricultural rural industries.	Groombridge is a village of <u>medieval origin</u> with its modern settlement edge along the northern boundary of the site, influenced by 20th century residential development.
Routeways – a dense network of historic routeways (now roads, tracks and paths).	A historic lane passes along the northern boundary of the site, passing into the site in the north-east and connecting with Station Road which is recorded as a historic drive. A historic routeway (public right of way) passes along the southern boundary. These routes contribute towards the <u>dense radiating network</u> of historic routeways.
Woodland – an abundance of ancient woodland mostly in small holdings, highly interconnected with hedges and shaws.	Wooded field boundaries contribute to the <u>highly interconnected and structurally varied mosaic of... outgrown hedges</u>. The <u>in-field trees</u> within the east of the site <u>provide additional connectivity to the wider landscape...</u>
Fieldsapes and heath – small, irregular and productive fields, bound by hedgerows and woods, and typically used for livestock grazing; with distinctive zones of lowland heaths and inned river valleys (reclaimed marshland).	Whilst the fields of the site are defined by <u>mixed woody boundaries...and thick hedges</u> , the field pattern is relatively linear and regular and medium in scale.
Dark night skies – intrinsically dark at night with our own galaxy (the Milky Way) visible.	The site is located within an <u>intrinsically dark landscape</u> according to CPRE's Night Blight Mapping (Figure 4), although is partly influenced by existing lights from properties on the settlement edge. The adjacent Station Road is an <u>unlit road</u>.
Aesthetic and perceptual qualities – arising from the interaction of people with the landscape, including the notion of a quintessential English pastoral landscape, intimacy of scale, a	The fields and surrounding hedgerows contribute to <u>the homely, pastoral feel and recognisable and unifying mosaic of open field and wooded habitats</u> .

sense of history and timelessness; rurality and tranquillity; glimpsed long views; freedom to explore and make connections with the natural world, and a rich legacy of features and ideas left by writers, poets and gardeners inspired by the landscape.	The public rights of way which pass along the site boundaries contribute to <i>a sense of freedom arising from access to a dense network of public rights of way and quiet roads suitable for walking...</i>
Land-based economy and rural living – with roots extending deep into history, and which has visibly and culturally shaped the landscape.	This character component of natural beauty is not expressed within the site.

Baseline Summary

How the site relates to the sensitivity of the wider assessment unit

The Assessment Unit

The *Wealden Landscape Sensitivity Assessment to Residential and Employment Development* assesses the Groombridge assessment unit to have a **high** sensitivity to small scale residential development (2-2.5 storey housing). The sensitivity analysis indicates that areas of complex landform, strong natural character including deciduous woodland, historic features including Groombridge Place Registered Park and Garden, defined settlement edge, low-rise residential character of the existing settlement edge, the strong rural and scenic character of the surrounding landscape, attractive rural landscape backdrop provided to the settlement, and location within and intervisibility with the wider AONB increase sensitivity to built development. However, the presence of ribbon development, few historic features in the wider assessment unit, and contained nature of views in some areas reduce the assessment unit's sensitivity to development.

The Site

Overall, it is considered that the site has a slightly lower sensitivity than the assessment unit as a whole and is considered to be of **moderate-high** sensitivity to small scale residential development (2-2.5 storey housing). The site demonstrates qualities which increase sensitivity for the wider assessment unit, including the elevated landform, its location beyond the defined settlement boundary formed by the railway line, the rural and tranquil character of the site and the proximity to public rights of way, including the promoted High Weald Landscape Trail. However, the site demonstrates some characteristics which are atypical of the wider assessment unit and decrease sensitivity. The site is located across a relatively flat area, which is pastoral in character but currently used for horse grazing. The historic field pattern has been eroded by the extension of gardens from properties to the north of the site and the amalgamation/subdivision of the fields by post and wire fencing for horse paddocks.

Variations in Sensitivity

There is no variation in sensitivity across the site.

How strongly the core components of character are expressed on the site

The site expresses some of the core character components of natural beauty of the High Weald AONB. In summary:

- The elevated landform forms part of the principal Forest Ridge;
- The site forms part of the rural context to the historic settlement of Groombridge (of medieval origin);
- A historic lane and promoted route to the south are historic routeways;
- Wooded field boundaries contribute to the highly interconnected woodland habitats and in-field trees in the east provide additional connectivity;
- The public rights of way to the north and south contribute to the sense of freedom for walkers; and
- The site forms part of a landscape with dark skies.

Overall, it is considered that there is a **moderate expression** of the core components of character.

Potential effects of developing the site, including on the core character components of natural beauty

The section below sets out the potential effects of developing the site, particularly on the core character components of natural beauty, and the potential mitigation and enhancement opportunities that should be considered to minimise impacts upon the landscape and visual baseline should this site be considered suitable for development.

Potential effects as a result of development on the site	Core character component of natural beauty potentially affected	Relevant key characteristics of the core character component potentially affected	Potential mitigation and enhancement opportunities
Landscape character and features			
Removal of mature trees and hedgerows, affecting the role they play in defining and screening the settlement edge and contributions to the interconnectivity of habitats.	Woodland	<i>Highly interconnected and structurally varied mosaic of many small wood....and outgrown hedges.</i>	■ Retain, protect and enhance mature vegetation within and surrounding the site, especially trees and hedgerows along the outer boundaries that contain the site, and the mature hedgerows that define internal field boundaries within site (in accordance with the AONB's Objectives W1 and PQ2). ■ Improve the connectivity of woodlands and hedgerows within and around the site through new tree planting and hedgerow corridors that are in character with the locality, using native species where possible / suitable (in accordance with the AONB's Objective W2).
Loss of the infield trees within the eastern part of the site.	Woodland	<i>Large numbers of isolated trees (often remnants from lost woodlands or hedges), such as in-field trees that provide additional connectivity to the wider landscape, as well as shelter and food source to a wide range of species.</i>	■ Retain the infield trees in the eastern part of the site and improve connectivity with other habitats through new tree planting (in accordance with the AONB's Objective W2).

Deterioration of the historic routeway and promoted footpath to the south.	Routeways	<i>A dense radiating network of historic routeways with a variety of origins.</i>	■ Retain, protect and enhance existing recreational access via the promoted footpath along the southern boundary of the site and the rural character of the historic route (in accordance with the AONB's Objectives R1 and PQ3).
Modifications to Station Road (recorded as a historic drove) or the historic lane that passes through the north of the site (recorded as a historic lane) to facilitate site access (e.g. road widening, creation of junction).			■ Reduce the impact of access works required to the historic lane/ drove, where possible, protecting the hedgerows along it where possible (in accordance with the AONB's Objectives R1 and R2).
Influence of lighting in the dark night skies resulting in night blight, including the potential introduction of streetlights along Station Road if used for access.	Dark night skies	■ <i>Intrinsically dark landscapes with a sense of naturalness.</i> ■ <i>Numerous unlit roads...</i>	■ Minimise the influence of lighting associated with new development and only install outdoor lighting where necessary (in accordance with the AONB's Objective DS1). ■ Follow the Institute of Lighting Professionals guidance⁴ and use dark sky-friendly lighting (in accordance with the AONB's Objectives DS1 and DS2).
Settlement form edge and setting			
Extension of development beyond the settlement boundary feature formed by the wooded railway to the west of the site. Deterioration of the rural character of the site which contributes to the setting of Groombridge, particularly properties along Lealands Close.	Settlement	<i>Villages and towns mostly of medieval origin...</i>	■ Locate development in the north of the site to relate better to existing development which extends to the east of the railway along Station Road and Lealands Close (in accordance with the AONB's Objective S1). ■ Given that the site is slightly elevated and sits above the 'low-rise' settlement edge, the height and massing of development should be considered in relation to the scale of existing development and underlying topography in the area (in accordance with the AONB's Objective S1). ■ Design of new buildings to respond appropriately to the character and appearance of the surroundings by using high quality materials in keeping with the local vernacular (in accordance with the AONB's Objective S2).

⁴ See the Institute of Lighting Professionals guidance for further information: <https://theilp.org.uk/publication/guidance-note-1-for-the-reduction-of-obtrusive-light-2021/>

			Development to draw on the principles contained within the High Weald AONB 'High Weald Housing Design Guide'⁵, 'Guidance on the selection and use of colour in development'⁶ and objectives of the High Weald AONB Management Plan⁷ (in accordance with the AONB's Objective S2).
Visual amenity			
Visibility of development seen by: - users of the public rights of way which pass to the north and south of the site, including the High Weald Landscape Trail to the south of the site; and - residents along the settlement edge, including along Lealands Close and Station Road.	Aesthetic and perceptual qualities	<i>The homely, pastoral feel to the whole landscape arising from its human-scale pattern and productivity.</i> <i>A recognisable and unifying mosaic of open field and wooded habitats.</i> <i>A sense of freedom arising from access to a dense network of public rights of way and quiet roads suitable for walking...</i>	- Retain, protect and enhance the wooded boundaries that enclose the site in views from the settlement edge (in accordance with the AONB's Objectives W1 and PQ2). - Screen new development with additional planting, particularly in views from Lealands Close and Station Road, using local / native species where possible / suitable to maintain the rural character of the wider area (in accordance with the AONB's Objective PQ2). - Reduce the density to encompass more space between/around buildings, interspersed with soft landscaping and tree planting, to soften visual impact and enhance integration of built form within the landscape (in accordance with the AONB's Objective PQ2). Enhance public access and retain the wooded and enclosed character of views from the public rights of way which pass to the north and south of the site, including the High Weald Landscape Trail (in accordance with the AONB's Objective PQ3).
Overall impact on the core character components of natural beauty of the High Weald AONB			
Moderate impact	The baseline analysis identifies that the site (and immediate surrounds) expresses some of the core character components of natural beauty, with a moderate level of expression. This is due to the elevated landform; the thick hedgerows and mature trees partially enclosing the site; infield trees within the eastern part of the site; a historic routeway (PRoW) crossing the site; and being part of a landscape with dark night skies. Development of the site is judged to have a moderate impact on the landscape and visual qualities/features that define the High Weald AONB, therefore somewhat affecting / impacting the ability of the Council to fulfil its statutory duty to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB.		

⁵ <https://www.highweald.org/look-after/planning/design-guide.html>

⁶ <https://www.highweald.org/look-after/planning/colour-study.html>

⁷ <https://www.highweald.org/high-weald-aonb-management-plan.html>

If the potential mitigation and enhancement opportunities set out above are applied, potential impacts as a result of the development on the site could potentially be reduced.

Variation to overall impact

There is no variation to the overall impact considered above.

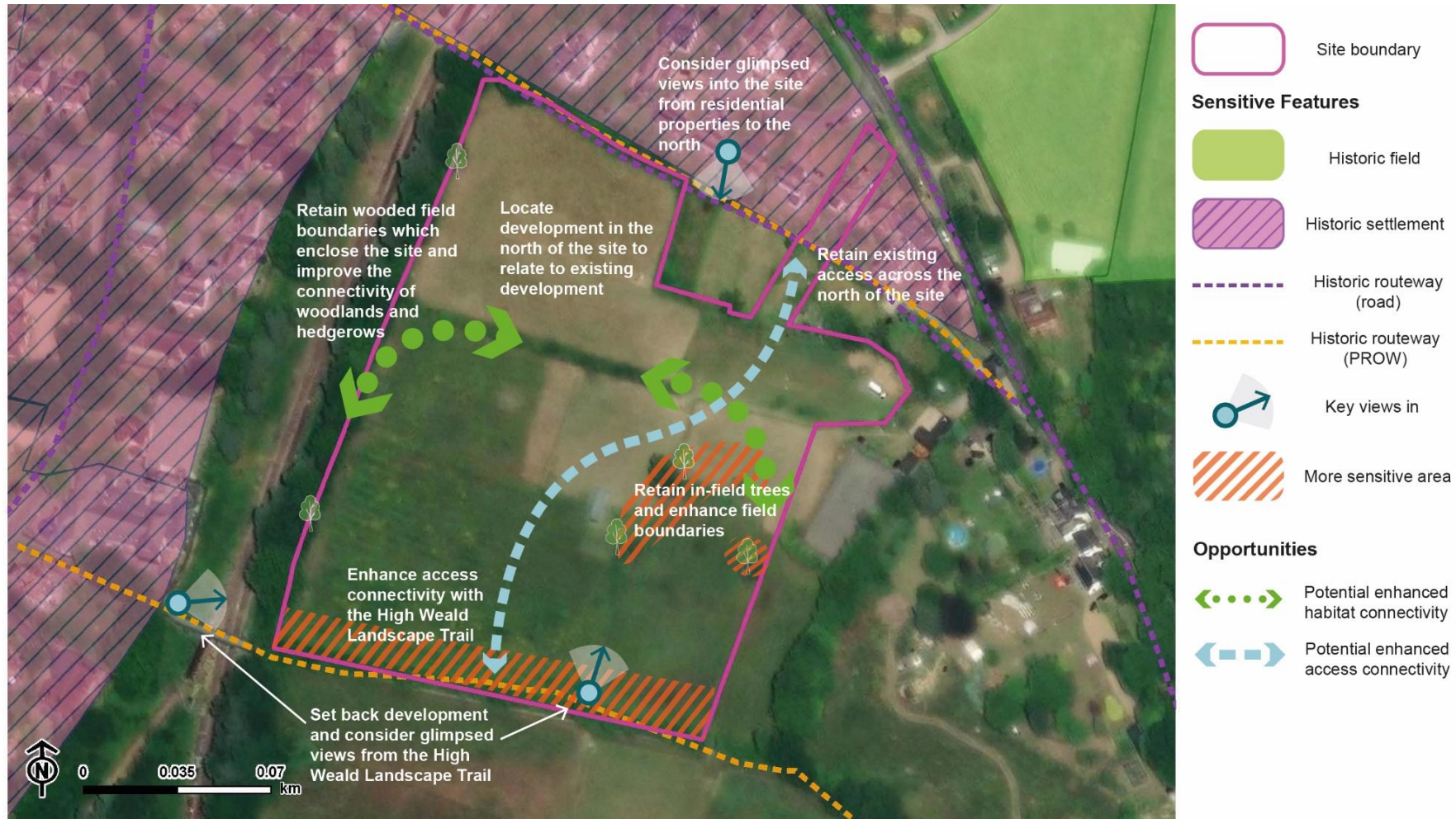
Summary and recommendations

The following map illustrates a summary of the constraints and opportunities of development on the site.

The site-specific recommendations for this site are as follows:

- Retain, protect and enhance trees and hedgerows along the outer boundaries that contain the site, and the mature hedgerows that define internal field boundaries within site.
- Retain the infield trees in the eastern part of the site and improve connectivity with other habitats through new tree planting.
- Locate development in the north of the site to relate to existing residential development which has extended east beyond the railway line.
- Given that the site is slightly elevated and sits above the 'low-rise' settlement edge, the height and massing of development should be considered in relation to the scale of existing development and underlying topography in the area.
- Minimise visibility of development from properties along Lealands Close, Station Road and from the public rights of way (including the High Weald Landscape Trail) which pass to the north and south of the site.

Figure 7: Summary map of constraints and opportunities



Source: Esri, Maxar, Earthstar Geographics, and the GIS User Community

Source: WDC, NE, HE

The Paddock, Lealands Farm, Station Road (1226/2040)

Site Details	
Potential development	Residential development proposed on entirety of site mapped below, but site is only considered an Option (OWI1) for 8 dwellings in the Focused Wealden Local Plan (2026).
Site location	This site is located to the east of the settlement and situated to the south-east of Lealands Farm, and to the north and east of properties along Station Road.

Figure 8: Site location and constraints

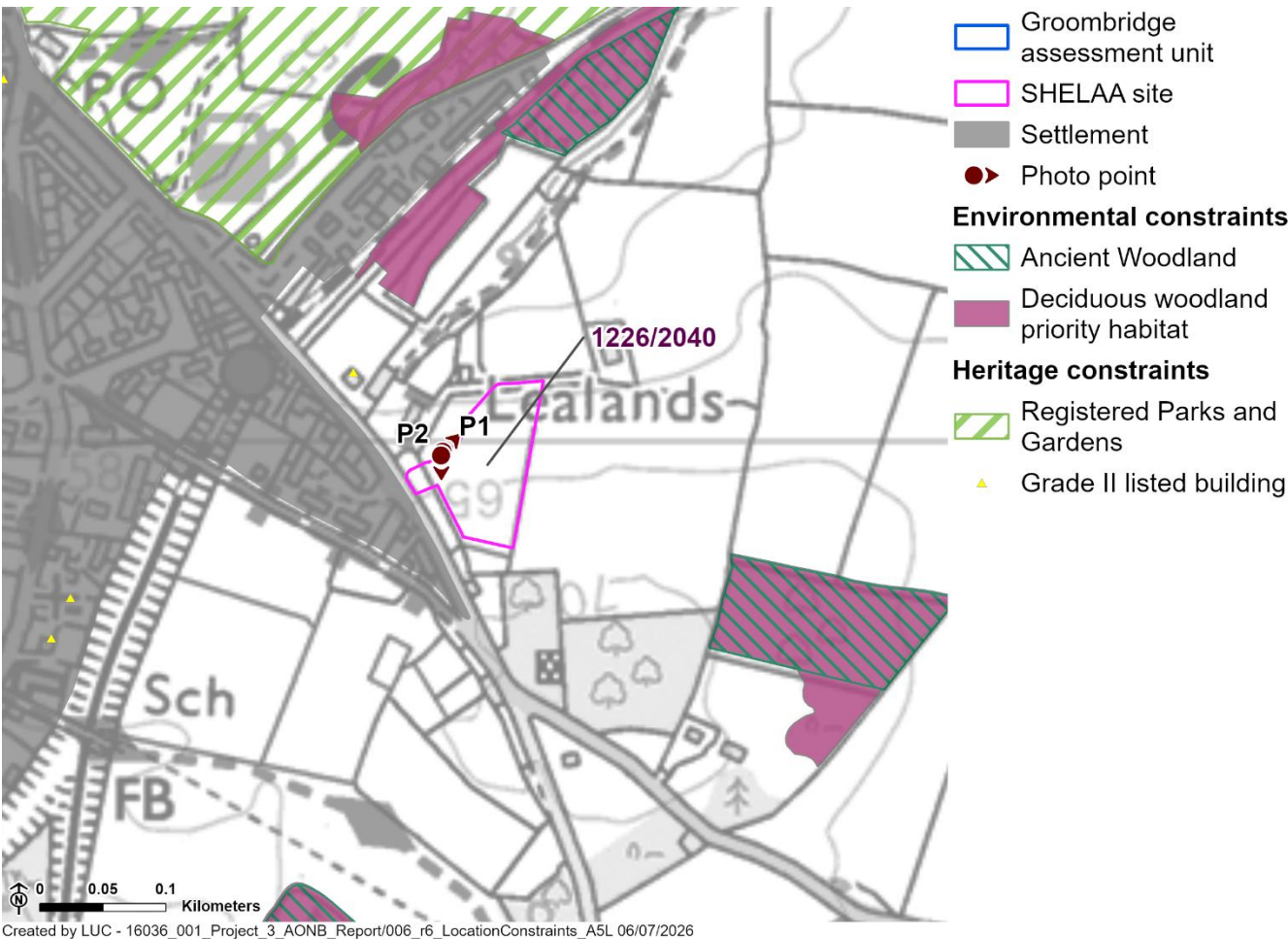
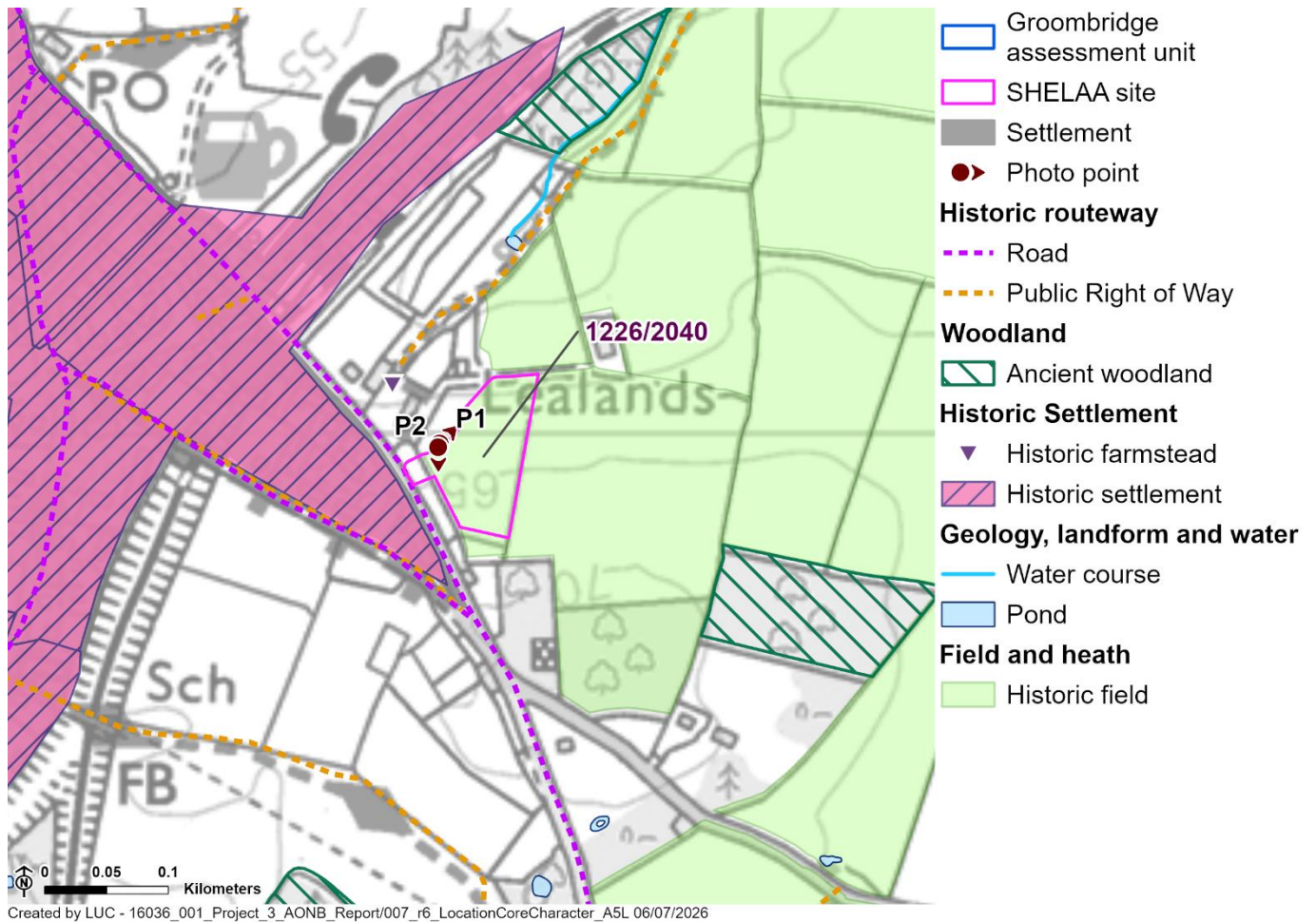


Figure 9: Site location and core character components of natural beauty of the High Weald AONB



Representative site photos



Photo 1: View from the western corner of the site looking across the gently sloping field within the site.



Photo 2: View south-east towards a property directly south of the site with a relatively open outlook.

Baseline Analysis

Baseline landscape character	
Key features and qualities of the site in relation to the wider assessment unit	Landform ■ The site comprises a gentle slope that descends to the north towards the River Grom, falling between approximately 65m AOD in the south to 60m AOD in the north. ■ It is located across a slightly elevated area above the Medway Valley (to the west) and forms part of broader pattern of undulating valley landform (which is more typical of the wider assessment unit). Natural character ■ Thick, mature hedgerows define most of the boundaries of the site, which is typical of the wider assessment unit. Three mature trees exist along the southern/south-western boundaries. ■ In the north-west, post and wire fencing runs along the edge of the site (and along the edge of the road leading to Lealands Farm, although the curtilage boundary of the farm is defined by mature trees and hedgerows (which is more typical of the wider assessment unit). Landscape pattern and time depth ■ The site comprises a single pastoral field that forms part of an intact historic field pattern, with strong hedgerow boundaries that reflect the regular piecemeal enclosure (as classified in the Sussex HLC and typical of the wider assessment unit). ■ No heritage features are recorded within the site, which is typical of the wider assessment unit. Perceptual aspects ■ The site is influenced by its proximity to the settlement edge of Groombridge, and Station Road, which reduce the sense of tranquillity (levels of tranquillity are recorded as relatively low in CPRE's Tranquillity Mapping, Figure 3). However, dark night skies are experienced from the site and wider assessment unit (light levels are recorded in the lower/darker bands of CPRE's Night Blight Mapping, Figure 4).
Settlement form and edge character and extent of built development	The site does not play a role in the separation of settlements. The site lies to the east of the settlement edge of Groombridge. Properties along Station Road lie immediately to the south-west, and are partly contained by mature trees and hedgerows which provide a soft settlement boundary one of the properties directly south of the site is separated from it by a post and rail fence. The properties associated with Lealands Farm on the edge of the settlement to the north-west of the site are also partly contained by vegetation, although the most northerly property is afforded with an open boundary to the north-east.
Baseline visual character	
Potential visual receptors	There are clear views into the site from the PRow that runs along the north-western boundary of the site, although are more filtered by intervening vegetation from Lealands Farm to the north-west. Views experienced by road users travelling along Station Road are screened by the strong hedgerow and mature tree boundaries along the edge of the road. Residents of properties along Station Road experience views into the site from upper storeys which look over the boundary hedgerow, and there are open views from the property directly south of the site. There are also views of the

	site seen above intervening vegetation from upper storeys of elevated properties along Lealands Close to the south-west of the site.
Extent of visibility within the High Weald AONB	There are some long views from the site to the north across the Grom valley with the opposing valley sides seen on the skyline.

Expression of the 'core character components of natural beauty' of the High Weald AONB on the site	
Natural systems (geology, soils, water and climate) – a deeply incised, ridged and faulted landform of clays and sandstone with highly variable, relatively undisturbed soils and numerous headwaters (gill streams) functioning under an oceanic climate.	The site forms part of the rolling ridges of the High Weald AONB, located along the edge of the <u>principal ridge (Forest Ridge)</u> , with some contribution towards the <u>pattern of faults and folds</u> . There are no distinctive geological or water features within the site.
Settlement – dispersed historic settlement including high densities of isolated farmsteads, hamlets and late-medieval villages founded on trade and non-agricultural rural industries.	Lealands Farm (adjacent to the site) contributes towards the <u>high density of historic farmsteads</u> ⁸ found within the AONB and while it is not within the site it lies adjacent to it. Groombridge is a village of <u>medieval origin</u> with its modern settlement edge along the south-western boundary of the site.
Routeways – a dense network of historic routeways (now roads, tracks and paths).	No historic routeways cross the site. Station Road along the south-western boundary of the site is recorded as a historic drove and contributes towards the <u>dense radiating network</u> of historic routeways, although its expression is altered by its use as a modern road with associated traffic, and by the residential properties along its edge.
Woodland – an abundance of ancient woodland mostly in small holdings, highly interconnected with hedges and shaws.	There are no distinctive woodland features within the site, although the thick, tall hedgerows and few mature deciduous trees which partly enclose the site, contribute towards the <u>highly interconnected and structurally varied mosaic of... outgrown hedges</u> . Other mature trees and hedgerows associated with Lealands Farm adjoin the north-western boundary and also form an interconnected habitat network.
Fieldsapes and heath – small, irregular and productive fields, bound by hedgerows and woods, and typically used for livestock grazing; with distinctive zones of lowland heaths and inned river valleys (reclaimed marshland).	The site comprises a small field used for <u>grazing livestock</u> that forms parts of a historic <u>irregular field pattern</u> (partly enclosed by thick hedged boundaries). It contributes to a <u>fieldscape characterised by historic farmsteads surrounded by their own fields</u> .
Dark night skies – intrinsically dark at night with our own galaxy (the Milky Way) visible.	The site is located within an <u>intrinsically dark landscape</u> according to CPRE's Night Blight Mapping (Figure 4), although is partly influenced by existing lights from properties on the settlement edge. The adjacent Station Road is an <u>unlit road</u> .
Aesthetic and perceptual qualities – arising from the interaction of people with the landscape, including the notion of a quintessential English pastoral landscape, intimacy of scale, a sense of history and timelessness; rurality and tranquillity; glimpsed long views; freedom to explore and	The historic Lealands Farm (adjacent to the site) and historic field pattern contribute to the <u>sense of history and timelessness</u> . The combination of grazing pasture and surrounding hedgerows and mature trees provides a <u>pastoral feel</u> and contributes to the <u>recognisable and unifying mosaic of open field and wooded habitats</u> . The public right of way that runs along the north-western boundary of the site contributes to the <u>sense of freedom arising from access to a dense network of public rights of way...suitable for walking...</u>

⁸ As identified in the High Weald AONB character components dataset (see Figure 9)

make connections with the natural world, and a rich legacy of features and ideas left by writers, poets and gardeners inspired by the landscape.	
Land-based economy and rural living – with roots extending deep into history, and which has visibly and culturally shaped the landscape.	The current use of the site reflects the <i><u>predominantly pastoral mixed farming with an absence of industrial scale farming</u></i> key characteristic.

Baseline Summary

How the site relates to the sensitivity of the wider assessment unit

The Assessment Unit

The *Wealden Landscape Sensitivity Assessment to Residential and Employment Development* assesses the Groombridge assessment unit to have a **high** sensitivity to small scale residential development (2-2.5 storey housing). The sensitivity analysis indicates that areas of complex landform, strong natural character including deciduous woodland, historic features including Groombridge Place Registered Park and Garden, defined settlement edge, low-rise residential character of the existing settlement edge, the strong rural and scenic character of the surrounding landscape, attractive rural landscape backdrop provided to the settlement, and location within and intervisibility with the wider AONB increase sensitivity to built development. However, the presence of ribbon development, few historic features in the wider assessment unit, and contained nature of views in some areas reduce the assessment unit's sensitivity to development.

The Site

Overall, it is considered that the site has a lower sensitivity than the assessment unit as a whole and is considered to be of **moderate-high** sensitivity to small scale residential development (2-2.5 storey housing). The site demonstrates some qualities which increase sensitivity for the wider assessment unit, including its location beyond the soft settlement boundary formed by mature vegetation which contains the properties along the edge, its slightly elevated sloping valley landform, and the pastoral field (enclosed by thick hedgerows and mature trees) that forms part of a historic field pattern. However, its proximity to the settlement edge slightly reduces tranquillity, decreasing its sensitivity (compared to the wider assessment unit).

Variations in Sensitivity

There is no variation in sensitivity across the site.

How strongly the core components of character are expressed on the site

The site expresses some of the core character components of natural beauty of the High Weald AONB. In summary:

- The elevated landform forms part of the principal Forest Ridge;
- Lealands Farm (adjacent to the site) contributes to the high density of historic farmsteads with the site contributing towards its setting;
- The site forms part of the rural context to the historic settlement of Groombridge (of medieval origin);
- The strong hedgerows and mature trees contribute to the highly interconnected woodland habitats, and define the irregular field;
- The grazing of livestock and enclosed field structure contribute to the pastoral feel of the landscape, with links to the history of the land based economy;
- A sense of history and timelessness is provided by the historic field pattern and Lealands Farm;
- The public right of way along the north-western site boundary contributes to the sense of freedom for walkers; and
- The site forms part of a landscape with dark skies.

Overall, it is considered that there is a **moderate expression** of the core components of character.

Potential effects of developing the site, including on the core character components of natural beauty

The section below sets out the potential effects of developing the site, particularly on the core character components of natural beauty, and the potential mitigation and enhancement opportunities that should be considered to minimise impacts upon the landscape and visual baseline should this site be considered suitable for development.

Potential effects as a result of development on the site	Core character component of natural beauty potentially affected	Relevant key characteristics of the core character component potentially affected	Potential mitigation and enhancement opportunities
Landscape character and features			
Changes to the elevated sloping landform as a result of interventions/ earthworks upon the landform.	Natural systems	■ <i>A principal ridge (Forest Ridge) running east – west from Horsham to Cranbrook...</i> ■ <i>A pattern of faults and folds that distinguishes the High Weald from the rest of the south and east of England...</i>	■ Minimise alterations to the landform by avoiding substantial earthworks and maintain the natural slope profile falling north-westwards towards Lealands Farm, aiming to retain the expression of the edge of the principal Forest Ridge and its contribution to the pattern of faults and folds (in accordance with the AONB's Objective G2).
Removal of mature deciduous trees and hedgerows, affecting the role they play in defining and partially screening the settlement edge, and contributions to the interconnectivity of habitats.	Woodland	<i>Highly interconnected and structurally varied mosaic of...outgrown hedges...</i>	■ Retain, protect and enhance mature vegetation within and surrounding the site, especially mature trees along the south-eastern and southern boundaries (in accordance with the AONB's Objectives W1 and PQ2). ■ Improve the connectivity of woodlands and hedgerows around the site through new tree planting and hedgerow corridors that are in character with the locality, using native species where possible / suitable (in accordance with the AONB's Objective W2).

Loss of the grazed pastures and deterioration of historic field pattern.	Fieldsapes and heath	■ <i>A generally irregular field pattern with individual fields relatively small...</i> ■ <i>Fieldscape characterised by historic farmsteads surrounded by their own fields resulting from medieval farming in severalty...</i> ■ <i>Fields, mostly permanent pasture, used for grazing livestock...</i>	■ Loss of pasture would be unavoidable with development of the site, as development would remove land from agricultural use with limited opportunities to retain areas due to the small scale of the site. However, field boundaries should be retained and enhanced where possible to avoid complete loss of field pattern (in accordance with the AONB's Objective FH2).
Modifications to Station Road (recorded as a historic drove) to facilitate site access (e.g. road widening, creation of junction).	Routeways	■ <i>A dense radiating network with a variety of origins...</i>	■ Reduce the impact of access works required to the road, where possible, protecting the hedgerows along it (in accordance with the AONB's Objectives R1 and R2).
Influence of further lighting in the dark night skies resulting in night blight, including the potential introduction of streetlights along Station Road if used for access.	Dark night skies	■ <i>Intrinsically dark landscapes with a sense of naturalness.</i> ■ <i>Numerous unlit roads...</i>	■ Minimise the influence of lighting associated with new development and only install outdoor lighting where necessary (in accordance with the AONB's Objective DS1). ■ Follow the Institute of Lighting Professionals guidance⁹ and use dark sky-friendly lighting (in accordance with the AONB's Objectives DS1 and DS2).
Settlement form edge and setting			
Extension of development beyond the robust boundary provided by mature vegetation between the site and the properties on the edge of the settlement.	N/A	N/A	■ Locate development in the south-west of the site to relate better to the existing settlement pattern (in accordance with the AONB's Objective S1). ■ The height and massing of development should be considered in relation to the scale of the existing development north of Station Road, including the buildings within the Lealands Farm historic farmstead (in accordance with the AONB's Objective S1).

⁹ See the Institute of Lighting Professionals guidance for further information: <https://theilp.org.uk/publication/guidance-note-1-for-the-reduction-of-obtrusive-light-2021/>

			■ Design of new buildings to respond appropriately to the character and appearance of the surroundings by using high quality materials in keeping with the local vernacular (in accordance with the AONB's Objective S2). ■ Development to draw on the principles contained within the High Weald AONB 'High Weald Housing Design Guide'¹⁰, 'Guidance on the selection and use of colour in development'¹¹ and objectives of the High Weald AONB Management Plan¹² (in accordance with the AONB's Objective S2).
Impingement on the setting of Lealands Farm (historic farmstead).	Settlement	<i>High density of historic farmsteads...</i>	■ Enhance the vegetation along the north-western boundary of the site (including new planting to replace the post and wire fencing) and consider an offset to minimise encroachment towards the boundary of Lealands Farm historic farmstead (in accordance with the AONB's Objective S1). Further assessment relating to the setting of heritage assets is advised.
	Aesthetic and perceptual qualities	<i>A sense of history and timelessness...</i>	
Visual amenity			
Visibility of development seen by: ■ walkers on the public footpath that runs along the north-western boundary of the site; ■ residents at nearby residential properties along Station Road;	Aesthetic and perceptual qualities	■ <i>A sense of history and timelessness arising from an ancient countryside with a human-scale agricultural tapestry; ...historic buildings.</i> ■ <i>The homely, pastoral feel to the whole landscape arising from its human-scale pattern and productivity.</i>	■ Retain, protect and enhance all existing vegetation including the thick hedgerow boundaries that enclose the site (in accordance with the AONB's Objectives W1 and PQ2). ■ Screen new development with additional planting, particularly from the property directly south of the site, using local native species where possible / suitable to maintain the rural character of the wider area (in accordance with the AONB's Objective PQ2). ■ Reduce the density of buildings to encompass more space between/around buildings, interspersed with soft landscaping and tree planting, to soften visual

¹⁰ <https://www.highweald.org/look-after/planning/design-guide.html>

¹¹ <https://www.highweald.org/look-after/planning/colour-study.html>

¹² <https://www.highweald.org/high-weald-aonb-management-plan.html>

■ residents of Lealands Farm; and ■ residents of elevated properties along Lealands Close.		■ <i>A recognisable and unifying mosaic of open field and wooded habitats.</i>	impact and enhance integration of built form within the landscape (in accordance with the AONB's Objective PQ2). ■ Consider views of development from the Lealands Farm historic farmstead along the north-western edge of the site, retaining and enhancing trees/hedgerows to screen views into the site (in accordance with the AONB's Objective PQ2). ■ Enhance public access and provide opportunities to experience the surrounding landscape (in accordance with the AONB's Objective PQ3).
Overall impact on the core character components of natural beauty of the High Weald AONB			
Moderate impact	The baseline analysis identifies that the site (and immediate surrounds) expresses some of the core character components of natural beauty, with a moderate level of expression. This is due to the elevated landform; the thick hedgerows and mature trees partially enclosing the site; the grazed pastoral field and part of a historic field pattern; the Lealands Farm historic farmstead (adjacent to the site); and being part of a landscape with dark night skies. Development of the site is judged to have a moderate impact on the landscape and visual qualities/features that define the High Weald AONB, therefore affecting / impacting the ability of the Council to fulfil its statutory duty to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB. If the potential mitigation and enhancement opportunities set out above are applied, potential impacts as a result of the development on the site could potentially be reduced. However, there would still be inevitable adverse impacts on the grazed pastures which would be lost. <u>Variation to overall impact</u> There is no variation to the overall impact considered above.		

Summary and recommendations

The site-specific recommendations for this site are as follows:

- Minimise alterations to the landform by avoiding substantial earthworks and maintain the natural slope profile falling north-westwards towards Lealands Farm, aiming to retain the expression of the edge of the principal Forest Ridge and its contribution to the pattern of faults and folds.
- Retain, protect and enhance mature trees along the south-eastern and southern boundaries.
- Locate development in the south-west of the site to relate better to the existing settlement pattern.
- The height and massing of development should be considered in relation to the scale of the existing development north of Station Road, including the buildings within the Lealands Farm historic farmstead.
- Replace the post and wire fencing along the north-western boundary with new planting and minimise encroachment with Lealands Farm historic farmstead.
- Screen new development with additional planting, particularly from the property directly south of the site and from Lealands Farm historic farmstead.

Cumulative effects of development sites proposed in the Groombridge assessment unit

Two sites have been assessed within the Groombridge assessment unit. The preceding site assessments have judged the overall impact on the core character components of natural beauty of the High Weald AONB to be:

Site	Overall impact on the core character components of natural beauty of the High Weald AONB	Variations
Land south of Back Lane and to the west of railway line (213/2040)	Moderate impact	No variation
The Paddock, Lealands Farm, Station Road (1226/2040)	Moderate impact	No variation

It is understood that both sites have been identified as an allocation/ option in the Focused Wealden Local Plan (2026). If both sites were brought forward for development to the extent as assessed, it would result in a potential of up to 29 dwellings being built.

The two sites are located very close to one another on opposite sides of Station Road. The development of these sites may lead to the perception of the eastern settlement edge extending into the countryside, and beyond the settlement boundary that is reasonably well defined by the railway and Station Road. Both sites are elevated above the Medway valley and in the case of site **213/2040**, slightly elevated above the settlement edge. Therefore, in terms of cumulative impact on components of character of the High Weald AONB, potential development on both sites would likely have an impact on the principal Forest ridge and contribution to the pattern of faults and folds on the edge of Groombridge. There is also likely to be a cumulative impact on historic routeways, particularly the historic drove along Station Road as this road runs between both sites and would likely serve as the access for both sites if they were to be developed.

Overall, it is considered that the cumulative impact of developing the two potential sites on the core character components of natural beauty of the High Weald AONB will be no greater than the sum of their individual impacts.