Character Area

122

High Weald



Key Characteristics

- A well-wooded landscape rising above the Low Weald and deeply incised in many places to give a complex pattern of ridges and steep stream valleys.
- Distinctive and scattered sandstone Outcrops or 'bluffs' rise above the farmland and woodland.
- The Ashdown Forest, in contrast to the more intimate green woods and pastures elsewhere, is a high, rolling and open heathland lying on the sandstone ridges to the west of the area.
- Main roads and settlements are sited along the prominent ridge-lines with a dense network of small, narrow, and winding lanes linking scattered villages, hamlets and farms. Large reservoirs are significant features within the High Weald landscape adding to the area's interest and variety.
- The legacy of the early iron industry, based on sandstone, ore, water and timber, has left extensive areas of coppice woodland and the characteristic 'hammer ponds' which provided power.
- High forest, small woods and copses, and a network of hedges and shaws link small, irregular fields created from cleared woodland. Many of these contain flower-rich meadows bordered by species-rich hedgerows. Heavy clay soils have reduced the impact of agricultural change in the area and it is still, in the main, a quiet pastoral landscape with mixed farming predominating.
- The cultivation of fruit and hops, together with the associated distinctive oast houses and the seasonal appearance of hop poles, are still a characteristic feature of the eastern High Weald.
- Distinctive red tile, brick, local stone and timber building materials, often including hung tiles and white weatherboarding, are characteristic of the historic settlements, farms and cottages. Local building materials characterise the area but recent 'suburbanisation' of farmstead buildings is eroding the distinctive local style in many places.



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Settlements were traditionally sited on the drier ridge tops whilst the slopes and valley bottoms form a mosaic of pasture, arable and woodland linked by hedgerows and shaws.

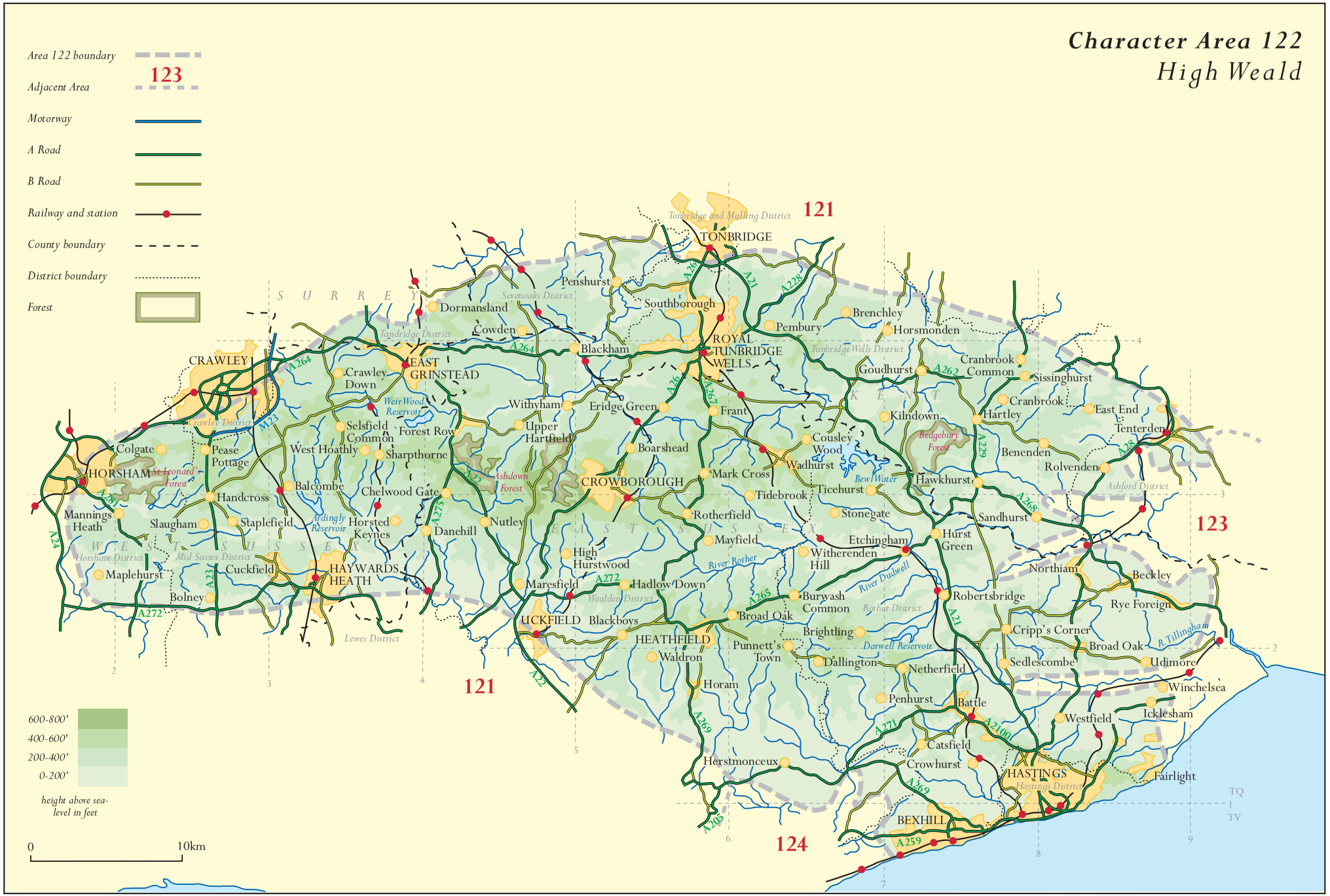
Landscape Character

The High Weald character area lies at the core of the Wealden anticline. The Greensand, Chalk and Wealden Clay to the north, south and west surround the sandstones and clays which underlie the forested ridges of the High Weald. The central sandstone core is strongly dissected by many major rivers, the headwaters of which have cut numerous steepsided valleys or 'ghylls', several of which are heavily wooded. From a distance, the appearance of the High Weald is one of a densely wooded landscape although closer inspection reveals a patchwork of fields, hedges and woods forming both open and enclosed landscapes along the rolling ridges and within the valleys.

Even more enclosed than the neighbouring Low Weald, the High Weald is – or feels – very secretive. The mosaic of small hedged fields and sunken lanes, together with the wooded relief and comparative inaccessibility, provides a sense of remoteness which is rare within lowland England landscapes.



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Ashdown Forest consists of open rolling heathland, birch woodland and scattered Scots pine on the sandstone ridge of the High Weald. The Forest forms the literary landscape much loved by readers of 'Winnie the Pooh'.

Typically, the roads, towns, villages and farms are sited on the ridges, with the damper, wooded valleys mainly unsettled. Vernacular buildings have a strong local character influenced by a variation in locally available, building materials and there. is an abundance of weatherboard, brick, tile, stone or plaster buildings. Numerous oast houses add to the local distinctiveness with stone church towers and spires located on ridges standing as major local landmarks.

Within the forested ridges and ancient countryside, hidden reservoirs constitute significant local features in the landscape. These reservoirs have a distinctive branching or winding character as a result of their creation from small Wealden river valleys.

Along the English Channel coast, the High Weald gives way to eroded sandstone and clay sea cliffs around Fairlight and disappears under the urban areas of Bexhill and Hastings to the south east. The eastern end of the High Weald is characterised by a series of broad, often flat-bottomed, river valleys opening out towards the coastal levels of Romney Marsh between Tenterden and Fairlight.

Physical Influences

The High Weald is underlaid by the Hastings Beds which comprise interbedded sands, soft sandstones and clays which give rise to the high, broken ground. Although not exceeding 240 m AOD, the High Weald is a hilly country of ridges and valleys. Numerous major ridges run mainly cast to west, for example the Ashdown Forest Ridge and the Battle Ridge.

These major ridges are deeply dissected by many tributaries of rivers which rise in the High Weald producing a network of small, steep sided ridges and valleys (ghylls). Low lines of sandstone often line these valleys, as at Eridge, where they provide the only inland rock climbing in South East England. The major rivers draining the High Weald are the Rother, Brede, Ouse and Medway which flow in broad valleys running roughly east to west.

North-west of Battle, Jurassic Purbeck Limestone contains gypsum beds which were formerly mined.

Historical and Cultural Influences

Clearance of the Wealden forest on a significant scale did not begin until the 9th century, reaching a peak in the 13th and 14th centuries. From the mid-14th century until the first world war the High Weald was relatively unchanged and even today many of the traditional field patterns and woodlands associated with the essentially medieval landscape still remain.

Medieval farmers were responsible for shaping the present day landscape of small fields and scattered farmsteads, with woodland and shaws left amongst them. Steep valleys were left unfelled to form 'ghyll woodlands'. The river valleys and the higher, drier ridge tops were important lines of communication on which early settlements were located.

The medieval pattern of dispersed farms, small hamlets and villages is associated with the practice of cultivating small parcels of land for rent – 'assarting' – which gave rise to the pattern of ad hoc rural settlement. These early, isolated, agricultural settlements later evolved into the characteristic High Weald hilltop villages such as Mayfield, Wadhurst and Hawkhurst.

The influence of the Wealden iron industry extended over 2000 years, features of which such as the hammer ponds – have survived to the present clay. These consist of a stairway of ponds created by damming a 'ghyll'. This produced a head of water which worked the bellows for smelting and the forges' tilt hammers. From the 15th to the 17th century, the High Weald was the foundry of England. Extensive, woodland management in the form of coppicing (for charcoal for the forges) accompanied the industry and little clearance was undertaken. The wealth generated by the iron industry funded grand houses and parklands, many of which still stand today.

Heathland was historically more widespread in the High Weald than it is today. Cessation of grazing, together with new conifer planting has led to the loss of open heathland, the only sizeable heathland remaining in the High Weald being Ashdown Forest, a former Royal Hunting Forest.

Buildings and Settlement

The High Weald is characterised by a dispersed settlement pattern of hamlets and scattered farmsteads dating from the medieval period, with large towns such as Tunbridge Wells, Crowborough, East Grinstead, Bexhill, Hastings and Horsham.

The High Weald consists of many examples of high-quality vernacular architecture with distinct local variation. Oak grown as standards in coppice and used green, is found in surviving timber framed houses and barns. Stone tiles from Horsham, used for the roofs of larger homes and farm buildings, were typical before red clay plain tiles became ubiquitous. Brick and stone walls are common, usually clad in characteristic softwood weatherboarding and tile. Timber-framed barns are also a particularly notable and characteristic feature of the High Weald.



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Traditional buildings reflect the use of local materials, such as redbrick and tiles,

A network of lanes, many of which are sunken between high hedges, links the numerous villages, and towns. Ribbon development along the network of lanes has, in many places, brought a suburban feel to the well-wooded landscape. Typically the towns, villages and farmsteads are sited on the ridges such as at West Hoathly, Battle, Mayfield and Burwash.

Many new housing developments on the fringes of towns such as Heathfield, Crowborough and Horsham are a contrast to the traditional character of the High Weald's small villages and farmsteads.

Due to the wealth created by the Iron Industry and the intricate wooded topography, the High Weald contains many grand houses and estates, such as Repton's Bayharn Abbey landscape. Gardens, such as those at Penshurst and Sissinghurst are a feature of the area and the parkland at Eridge is one of the oldest deer parks in the area.

Land Cover

The dominant land-use is grassland supporting mainly sheep grazing with some cattle and pigs. Within this complex small-scale agricultural landscape there are variations in local land use. These are due to subtle changes in the soils and range from hops and orchards on the better soils of the Kent river valley bottoms to the sandy heaths of Ashdown Forest in the west. The generally nutrient-poor soils, all prone to waterlogging, have meant that the High Weald has retained much of its woodland cover. Remnants of former hunting forests dating back from the time of the Norman conquests are present today, surviving as ancient oak and beech pollards with associated elaborate systems of boundary banks and ditches.

The patchwork landscape of small woodlands, small fields and hedgerows dissected by river valleys, wide roadside verges, ponds and old churchyards, support a wealth of plant species across a wide range of habitats. Relic heathland, ancient semi-natural woodland, wooded ghylls and some remaining unimproved herb-rich meadows are all characteristic High Weald habitats. The overriding character of the woodland is broadleaved, often ancient in origin, with a few large blocks and many smaller woodlands interconnected by hedgerows and broad strips of woodland or shaws. Numerous conifer plantations such as at St Leonard's Forest are locally dominant features and contribute to the overall wooded character.

Healthy areas occur in open spaces and along rides in the woodlands on lighter soils in the western area. Mature hedgerow trees within the well-established hedge network reinforce the illusion of a well-wooded landscape with the notably high number of ponds, characteristic of the High Weald creating interesting variety and contrast.



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Diversification on farms has introduced features more appropriate to a suburban landscape.

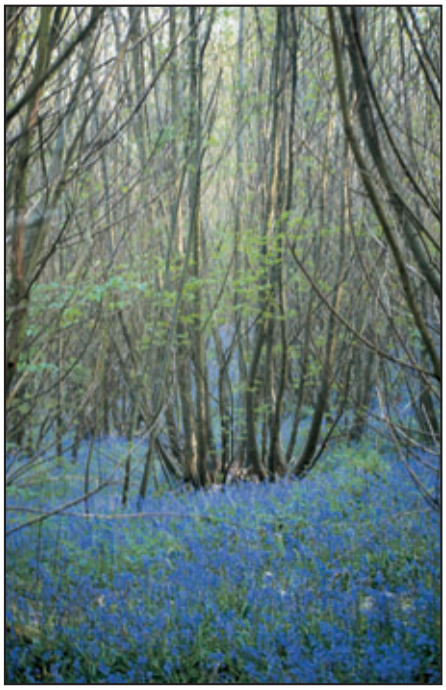
The Changing Countryside

- Development around built-up areas throughout the region, but particularly in the north and west related to the location of railway lines and stations and on the ringes between the Low and High Weald areas.
- Loss of characteristic landscape features such as hedgerows, meadows, wooded ghylls, hammer ponds and parklands due to inappropriate management.

- Loss of heathland due to cessation of grazing, notably in Ashdown Forest.
- Fragmentation of agricultural holdings due to the marginal nature of farmland – renovation of farm buildings by urban-based owners and the associated introduction of non-characteristic materials, details, designs and exotic tree species – also other forms of diversification of marginal farmland to new uses such as fish farms, craft workshops, etc.
- Decline in use of vernacular building materials in new developments and introduction of urban features such as lighting and alarms.
- Decline in traditional management and neglect of small coppice woodlands, traditional orchards and hop gardens.
- An increase in road traffic above levels acceptable for the rural nature of the generally small roads and winding lanes with subsequent increase in conflicts between motorised traffic, pedestrians, horse-riders and cyclists.
- Pressures on the landscape from new main roads and improvements.
- Incipient forces for change from new land uses such as pony paddocks and associated clutter, tennis courts, street lighting and from golf courses.
- Loss of remoteness and erosion of local character by suburban type development and materials.
- Replacement of characteristic hedges with conifers, concrete or close-boarded fences around urban edges.

Shaping the Future

- Appropriate management measures would prevent a further decline in the extent and quality of coppice woodlands and shaws. New native broadleaved woodland planting should be considered.
- Heathland restoration in Ashdown Forest, St Leonard's Forest and Broadwater Forest is important.
- The conservation and restoration of traditional orchards and hop gardens where appropriate should be addressed.
- Hammer ponds, meadows and parklands are important aspects of the history of the area.
- Vernacular styles and building materials should be an important aspect of new developments.
- The replacement of conifers, concrete and close-boarded fences with new hedges would be beneficial in many areas.
- The character of more remote areas needs to be safeguarded.



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The area is well wooded and contains a high proportion of ancient semi-natural woodland which usually has extensive carpets of bluebells and wood anemones.

Selected References

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Glossary

shaws: strip of trees or bushes forming the border of a field