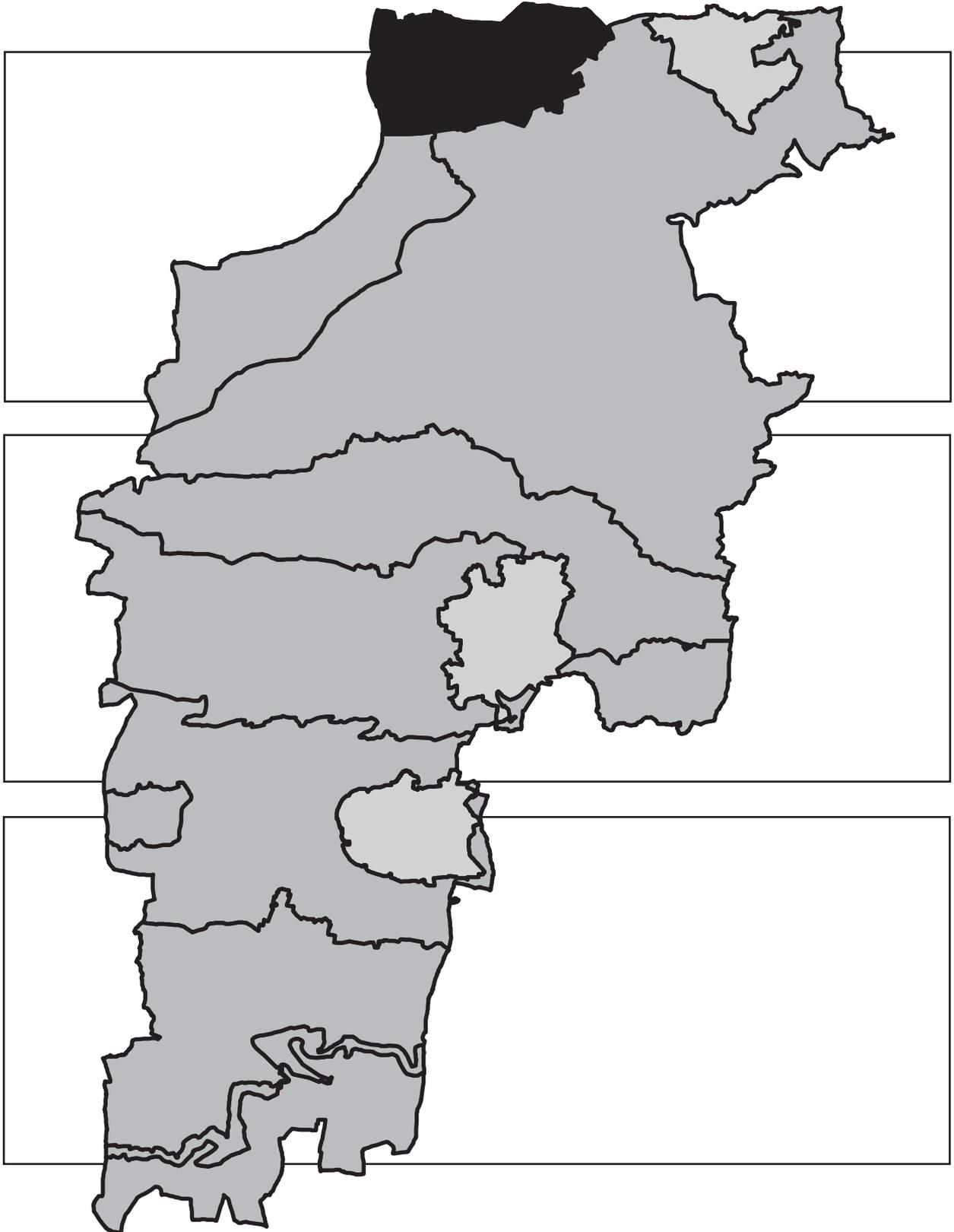


Landscape Character Area 7
High Weald Plateau



High Weald Plateau

CHARACTERISATION

Summary and key characteristics

A low sandstone plateau which merges with the clays of the Low Weald plain to the north.

- Headwater drainage of the Eden, Medway and Mole Rivers originates here, the significant little valleys of the streams bounding the plateau to the south and dissecting it to the north east.
- Significant woodland cover, a substantial portion of it ancient, including some larger woods and a dense network of hedgerows and shaws, creates a sense of enclosure, the valleys secluded.
- Small assemblies of assorted pastures contrast with blocks of larger, modern fields.
- Heathland cover is remnant, most of the former heaths today covered with regenerated woodland.
- Busy lanes and roads, particularly the A264 through Copthorne along the Crawley–East Grinstead corridor and the B2038 running north into the area from Turners Hill.
- Pockets of rich biodiversity concentrated in the valleys, heathland, and woodland.
- Rural settlement pattern dispersed and scanty, with expanded settlements at Copthorne and Crawley Down, ribbon development along some roads, and plotlands in woodland settings.
- Mill sites and hammer ponds.
- Varied traditional rural buildings built with diverse materials including timber framing and varieties of local brick and tile hanging.
- Designed landscapes and exotic treescapes associated with large country houses.

Description and experience of the landscape

10.1 Although part of the High Weald forests, this area has a character sufficiently its own to make it worth separating from the *High Weald (Area 6)* and *Worth Forest (Area 8)* Landscape Character Areas surrounding it. Lying wholly within Mid Sussex District, the area forms a distinct plateau bounded to the south by the secluded Rowfant and Fen Place Mill valleys and cut into in the north-east by the streams of Felbridge Water. It adjoins the M23 Motorway and Crawley to the west and lies a mile or so away from East Grinstead to the east.

10.2 Although plateau-like, the land is not high, generally less than 100 metres above sea level. On the edge of the *High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)* lying to the south, the area comprises the southern edge of a much wider, low plain. Within the plateau, three Wealden rivers (Eden, Medway and Mole) begin life or have tributaries, each river flowing in a different direction. Geologically, the area is a continuation of the High Weald Hastings Beds. The underlying rocks are mainly Upper Tunbridge Wells sandstone and clay with scattered deposits of head.

To the north, these rocks merge without interruption with the Weald Clay in Surrey, the transition marked by the resumption of the typical pastoral landscape of the Low Weald.

10.3 The deepish gill streams cutting into the plateau help to define its boundaries. Crawley Down perches above the marked slopes falling at Fen Place Mill to the high Medway stream (loaded with hammerponds, which are also numerous elsewhere on the plateau streams), Rowfant secure in a secluded valley to the west. To the north, there is an intricate valley landscape with hammerponds along Felbridge Water, to the south of Hedgecourt Lake, just in Surrey. The plateau proper is flat or undulating. From open ground there are occasional long views over the Surrey Weald to the Surrey Hills.

10.4 The landscape is strongly characterised by blocks of woodland with shaws, a few of the former substantial, for instance, around Rowfant, south of Copthorne and centred on Felbridge Water at the small valley settlements at Cuttinglye and Furnace Woods. The woodlands and shaws enclose and conceal small assemblies of assart pastures which contrast with blocks of larger, amalgamated fields. Within the fields, the hedgerows are mature, large trees prevalent at field boundaries.

10.5 Most of the formerly grazed heathland has disappeared, much of it covered by new, naturally regenerating woodland. For instance, the substantial Copthorne Common is no longer predominantly heathy, although the heathland that remains there is greatly valued for its wildlife.

10.6 The gradual intermingling of development with the traditional High Weald landscape since the 19th Century, and particularly since the Great War, has modified the historic character of the area. However, whilst the bustle of modern life and suburbia is never far away, it is noteworthy how much of the area has managed to keep its distinctive and attractive rural character. Very locally, some areas seem peaceful and tranquil, although aircraft noise is a regular distraction. Despite the degree of development, farming continues to husband the landscape, based on a mix of woodland, pasture and arable farming.

10.7 Adjoining Crawley at the M23 Motorway, and with Gatwick Airport only a couple of miles away, the area lies on the edge of a part of West Sussex where, arguably, change has been the greatest since the Second World War. The area itself contains two greatly expanded villages, at Copthorne and Crawley Down. Long-established ribbon development and settlements at Effingham Park and Domewood in Surrey characterise the corridor of the busy A264, which weaves in and out of the County between Crawley and East Grinstead. Plotlands established after the War characterise parts of the area, as do commercial and industrial premises (including hotels and garages), notably at Crabbet Park and Rowfant.

10.8 Other new elements in the landscape include large overhead power lines, their dominance variable depending on the lie of the land and on the openness of the landscape. Part of the great Southern Railway, the former railway line from East Grinstead to Three Bridges (opened 1855, with a station at Rowfant) was scrapped in the 'sixties by Lord Beeching and today is a pleasant cycle and walkway, crossed by the Sussex Border Path. The degree of development in the area means that the fringe between the urban areas and the countryside is long. Problems associated with the rural urban fringe include underused farmland, the fragmentation and degradation of the woodland and field pattern, and access pressures from nearby residential areas.

Biodiversity

10.9 Based on the alternation of sandy and clay soils and the particular conditions obtaining in the gills valleys, the natural history of the area is diverse. The area

contains no Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and a small number of Sites of Nature Conservation Importance (SNICIs). The first of these comprises the ancient woodland in the Lobbs Wood valley and species-rich vegetation on the margins of Furnace Pond. The second comprises the neutral and acid grassland, semi-natural woodland and dry heath of Copthorne Common (two contiguous areas of common land, the larger of which is managed as a golf course).

10.10 The character of the woodlands is varied and includes a range of semi-natural woodland types, many formerly managed in the centuries-old Wealden way as 'coppice-with-standards'. Dominant forms include oak-ash and hornbeam woodlands with understorey species such as hazel, as well as stands of beech, sweet chestnut coppices and broadleaved, mixed and coniferous plantation.

Historic character

10.11 The historic character of the area is similar to that for the High Weald and the background on historic character in the *High Weald* Landscape Character Area section therefore applies. Undoubtedly the most important historical sites in the area are the rich remains of the Wealden iron industry. These include many hammerponds and some former mill sites, one or two of the latter preserved and restored. The area contains three non-registered mainly post-medieval parkscapes identified by the local authorities.

Settlement form and local distinctiveness

10.12 The evolution of the historic settlement pattern of the area and the nature of its local distinctiveness today is essentially similar to that for the High Weald and the background on settlement pattern in the *High Weald* Landscape Character Area section therefore applies. Important houses in the area include *Heatherwood* (1871) at Crawley Down, *Crabbet Park* (1873), *Newlands* (1848-9) at Copthorne, and the Elizabethan *Rowfant House* (with an earlier medieval core).

10.13 The Church of *St John the Evangelist* (1877) at Copthorne is quite large, rock-faced, with a steeple. At Crawley Down, *All Saints* (1843-88) has a bellcote (belfry).

10.14 As noted above, much of the area has become increasingly suburbanised through development at Copthorne, Crawley Down, Down Park and Furnace Wood (only the area south of Copthorne has a rural character in keeping with adjoining Landscape Character Areas). In addition, traffic associated with this development and trunk road movement through the area is strongly evident to the north, given the position of the area between Crawley and East Grinstead. Much of the suburban development referred to comprises secluded woodland estates developed on plotlands (land allocated for smallholdings and development after the Second World War). Today, these estates are a highly characteristic form of settlement in the Felbridge Water valleys, notably at Furnace Wood.

Strategic gap

10.15 The County Council, Mid Sussex District Council and Crawley Borough Council have long recognised pressures for development on the open land between Crawley and East Grinstead and have designated this land as a strategic gap.

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EVALUATION

Change – key issues

- Decline in traditional woodland management techniques such as coppicing and continuing extensive planting of conifers.
- Spread of invasive introduced species, particularly rhododendron and neglect of some parkland landscapes.
- Continuing amalgamation of small fields with hedgerow loss and the ageing and loss of hedgerow and field trees.
- Reduction of heathland to a few pockets (principally at Copthorne Common) due to cessation of grazing management and subsequent woodland invasion and woodland re-planting.
- Visual impact of new urban and rural development including modern farm buildings, horse riding centres and paddocks.
- Perceived increased traffic levels on small rural lanes, with consequent demands for increased signage and road and junction safety improvements.
- Expansion of Crawley and East Grinstead and influence of the M23 Motorway corridor.
- Increasing pervasiveness of development and traffic movement and noise in parts of the area, particularly along the Crawley-East Grinstead corridor and along the rural-urban fringe.
- Perceived increased traffic levels on small rural lanes with consequent demands for road improvements.
- Gradual loss of locally distinctive building styles and materials.
- Gradual suburbanisation of the landscape including the widespread use of exotic tree and shrub species.

Landscape and visual sensitivities

- Areas of perceived naturalness continue to compete with increased and pervasive levels of development and traffic movement, although much of the area has managed to keep its distinctive and attractive rural character.
- Woodland cover limits the visual sensitivity of the landscape and confers a sense of intimacy, seclusion and tranquillity although various woodlands have been developed as suburban woodland estates.
- Unobtrusive settlement pattern in many parts.
- Assart pastures contribute to the intimacy of the landscape.
- Important pockets of rich biodiversity are vulnerable to loss and change.
- Highly characteristic and valuable legacy of designed landscapes and treescapes.

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MANAGEMENT

Management Objective

Conserve the mosaic of woodland and other habitats and the intimate nature of the remaining agricultural landscape.

Land Management Guidelines

- Maintain and restore the historic pattern and fabric of the woodland and agricultural landscape for scenic, nature conservation and recreational purposes.
- Ensure that any new development has a minimum impact on views into and from the area and is integrated within the landscape, paying particular attention to the siting of telecommunications masts.
- Plan for long-term woodland regeneration, the planting of new small broad-leaved farm woodlands, and appropriate management of existing woodlands, and reduce rhododendron invasion and bracken cover in woodlands and on heathland.
- Reduce the impact of forestry where possible by encouraging sensitive forestry practice including small-scale felling rotation, and incorporating mixed species.
- Conserve, strengthen and manage existing hedgerows and hedgerow trees and re-plant hedgerows where they have been lost, particularly in areas close to urban development, for instance, at Crawley Down.
- Conserve and re-plant single oaks in hedgerows to maintain succession.
- Where appropriate, conserve and increase significant tree cover in and around villages and on the rural urban fringe of Copthorne and Crawley Down including along the approach roads to settlements and along the busy urban routes including within the Crawley–East Grinstead corridor.
- Conserve and manage existing hedgerows and hedgerow trees and re-plant hedgerows where they have been lost.
- Conserve woodland biodiversity and the landscape of the gills, protecting rare and uncommon woodland plant communities associated with them.
- Maintain and manage all lakes and ponds and their margins for their landscape diversity and nature conservation value.
- Conserve and manage remnant open heathland by preventing the encroachment of scrub and create new, interconnected heathlands.
- Protect the character of rural lanes and manage road verges to enhance their nature conservation value.
- Continue to maintain the natural setting of the Worth Way.
- Reduce the visual impact of stabling and grazing for horses.
- Minimise the effects of adverse incremental change by seeking new development of high quality that sits well within the landscape and reflects local distinctiveness.

The area is part of the High Weald in Mid Sussex. For the Management Objective and Land Management Guidelines for the wider area, see **Planning and Land Management Guidelines Sheet HW1 (High Weald)** in Part Three. The area covered by the Sheet includes:

The *High Weald (Area 6)* and *High Weald Plateau (Area 7)* Landscape Character Areas in Mid Sussex District.