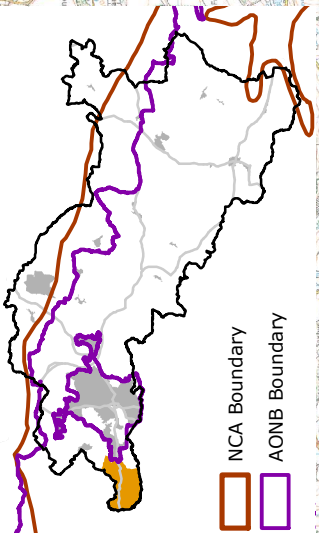
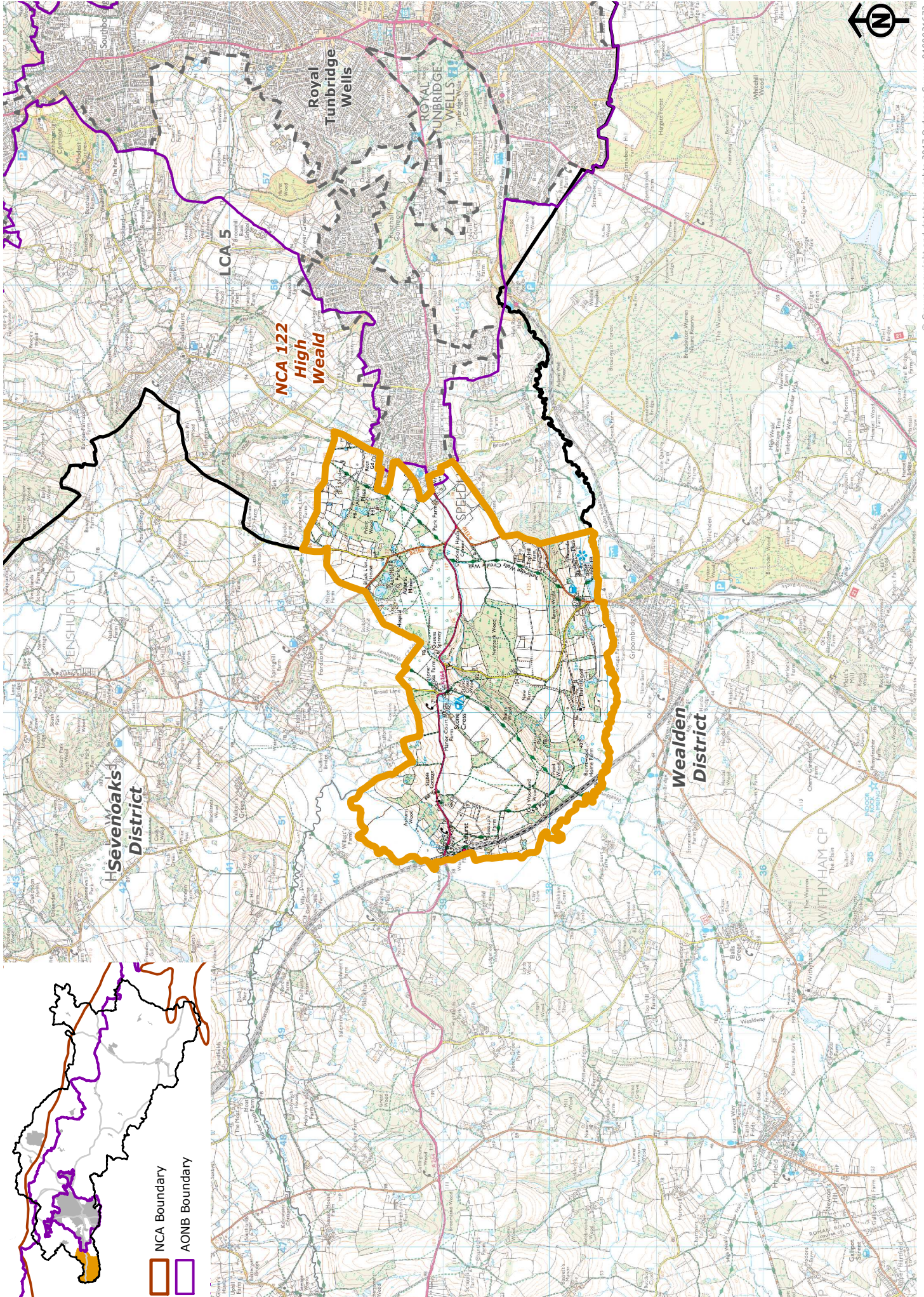


LCA 9 - Ashurst Wooded Farmland



SUMMARY

A smooth, broad plateau which drops gently down to the Medway Valley. Dominated by large open arable fields and blocks of mixed woodlands. Estate parklands are also a feature.



Key Characteristics

1) Smooth plateau which drops down to the west and south and offers long views out over East Sussex and the Medway Valley.

The plateau drops down to the River Medway and its floodplain to the west, and the valley of the River Grom (a tributary of the Medway) to the south, on the border with Wealden district.

There are long panoramic views from the top of the plateau (such as the hilltop south-west of Stone Cross) to the north and west across the Medway Valley into Sevenoaks district to Top Hill Wood/ Walter's Green. Correspondingly, this area – including Stone Cross and Ashurst Wood – forms a feature in views from Sevenoaks. There are also expansive views into Wealden district to the south such as from Groombridge Road B2110, which stretch to Ashdown Forest.

2) A broad, open landform without intersecting ghyll valleys.

Geologically, the area is predominantly underlain by Sandstone of the Ardingly Formation and Tunbridge Wells Sand, although the edges of the area – where the main villages of Ashurst and Groombridge lie – are partly underlain by Wadhurst Clay. The landform is smoother and more open without the intricate, intersecting ghyll valleys which characterise the area around Speldhurst to the east.

3) Estate houses and associated parklands are prominent with lodges and estate cottages being a characteristic built feature.

The estates include Ashurst Park and Groombridge Place. The parklands (generally formed in the 19th century) offer a distinct contrast of irregular sweeps of pastures, interspersed with elegant clumps of trees of oak and beech. Some estates have distinctive boundary fences and lodges, which contribute to the ornamental feel of the landscape.

Groombridge Place is listed Grade II* on the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens and crosses into Wealden District. The existence of a manor at Groombridge was first recorded in 1286. It comprises a 17th century walled garden attached to a Grade I listed 17th century house with a surviving medieval brick and sandstone-walled moat all set within 19th century parkland. The moated site is a Scheduled Monument and was the location of the Bennet household for the 2005 film version of *Pride and Prejudice*.

Ashurst Park is an informal garden with lakes, woodland and winding walks laid out in the early 19th century around a Victorian mansion, set in parkland with mature trees on the site of the previous land of Ashurst Plain. Part of the parkland has since been developed as a private hospital but both house and hospital sit within a parkland setting.

4) A mix of farmsteads and rural dwellings scattered through the area, with small village nodes at Groombridge and Ashurst.

A rural settlement pattern of small hamlets and dispersed farmsteads and rural dwellings is generally situated on the lower slopes, alongside the roads and lanes. Local sandstone is frequently used for buildings, with timber framing and tile hanging also common. The hamlets of Ashurst and Old Groombridge occupy the flatter ground of the lower slopes close to the rivers. The small hamlet of Stone Cross comprises medieval farmsteads arranged at a crossing point of ancient routeways.

Old Groombridge is a delightful village belonging to the Groombridge Estate, on the border with East Sussex. It has a sloping triangular green surrounded by pantiled paths and a picturesque row of 17th century tile hung cottages flanking two sides; with the church of St John on the other side, built in 1625. There are many intact listed buildings remaining, and the Conservation Area (which also includes the registered parkland of Groombridge Place) has a largely unspoilt rural setting. Vernacular materials include a mellow palette of brick, tile hanging, tile roofs, timber-framing, sandstone and weatherboarding.

Ashurst is a small village one street wide, located at a bridging point over the river with a tiny sandstone church which is Grade I listed and cluster of listed buildings situated slightly further up the hill.

Langton Green lies adjacent to the character area as it is contained within the limits of built development of Royal Tunbridge Wells to the east. The unspoilt rural setting of the landscape surrounding the village contributes to its special qualities, being located on the top of the same flattish ridge. The village is arranged around a village green, given a sense of enclosure by the surrounding buildings, many of which are listed and date from the 15th century. Typical vernacular materials include timber-framed buildings, sandstone and clay bricks and tiles for buildings and boundary walls.

5) Large arable fields dominate the ridge tops, with small irregular assart fields on the slopes, interspersed with extensive regular blocks of mixed woodland and individual mature trees.

The more open landform has had a considerable influence on the land cover with large arable fields predominating on the ridge tops and small irregular medieval assart fields on the slopes, having been cut out of the surrounding woodland (Ashurst Wood and Burrs Wood). Hawthorn hedges and wooded hedges surround the fields, although frequently these have been replaced by broken post and wire fencing. The irregular and sinuous, wooded field boundaries and the small irregular and semi-regular fields add a layer of visual texture to the landscape, breaking up the larger expanses of arable fields. Together with the areas of ancient woodland and ancient replanted woodland, they create a sense of time depth to the previous state of the landscape.

Woodlands in this area tend to consist of large-scale, regular blocks as opposed to the thin valley ghyll woodlands to the east. Individual mature oak trees create framed views and conifers, especially Scots Pine and specimen trees, are prominent features within the landscape around the western fringe of Royal Tunbridge Wells.

6) Rural lanes and footpaths following the routes of ancient droeways cross the landscape north-south and join the main east-west routeway which crosses the river valley at Ashurst.

The ancient routeways predominantly run north to south, and link to ridgetop routeways across the High Weald. These historic droeways (e.g. Groombridge Road) were the former lanes used for transhumance – the seasonal movement of people and animals for summer and winter feeding. This generally involved feeding pigs on acorns and fallen forest nuts and fruits in areas of woodland pasture (or 'dens'), isolated areas in the High Weald.

7) Lack of intrusions in the area creates a strong rural character. The area is popular for walking, with a number of recreational trails.

The Wealdway, Sussex Border Path and Tunbridge Wells Circular Walk all traverse this area across the plateau, connecting with a network of smaller footpaths and bridleways which go through woodlands and across fields.

The rural character of the area is dominant, with a lack of modern intrusions and an area of dark skies in the south-west of the area around Burrs Wood.

Evidence of Past Use and Cultural Evolution

- 1) Evidence of historic field boundaries – particularly on the hill tops (south west of Stone Cross and north of The Hollands), comprising wavy boundaries with hedgerows and wooded hedgerows.
- 2) An ancient routeway (now the A264) connects the bridging point at Ashurst to Royal Tunbridge Wells, along the ridgetop links to a network of other radiating routeways which descend into the valleys to the north and south.
- 3) The area had little development until the early 19th century, with only a mill, an inn,

church and a few other houses clustered around the bridging point at Ashurst, in addition to a dispersed pattern of estates and farmsteads.

- 4) There is community knowledge of the former Wealden iron industry in the area including iron forges in the woodland south of Stone Cross.
- 5) The place name of Ashurst means 'Ash Wood' and is likely to have been an area of wood pasture. The water mill would have been located on the River Medway.
- 6) 'Hurst' is a common element in place names in and around Tunbridge Wells, meaning woodland on a hill. It is an indication that these areas were being settled in the early medieval period, on areas of enclosed woodland on prominent hilltops which were easily identified in the more open wood-pasture type landscape of this part of the High Weald.

Semi-Natural Landscape and Priority Habitats

- 1) There is a relatively large cover of woodland including large blocks of ancient replanted woodland at Newpark Wood and Burrs Wood. There are also blocks of ancient woodland at Ashurst Wood and Priest Wood. Priest Wood is a LWS comprising woodland (large mature oak with holly and birch understorey), ponds and grassland. The area supports acid-loving species and unimproved grassland which contains a varied mix of species.
- 2) Relatively large areas of wildflower grassland – notable areas include Valley Barn Meadow on the floodplain of the River Medway to the west of Ashurst Wood (unimproved) and Priest Wood (unimproved).
- 3) Broad swathes of permanent and semi-improved pasture on the hill slopes represent an internationally important reserve of acidic and neutral grassland (a BAP priority habitat). These fields are distinguished from improved grassland by their rougher texture, floral diversity and subtle green tones. They are especially prominent on the slopes either side of the Langton Green ridge – north of The Hollands and at Ashurst Place. They include neutral, damp pastures on the lower slopes with drier acidic grassland on the upper slopes and support a rich and varied flora. The pastures are frequently separated by narrow bands of shaw woodland comprising sessile oak, birch and holly.

Valued Features and Qualities

In addition to the valued features and qualities which apply to the whole of the Borough noted in **Chapter 1**, features and qualities considered to be of particular value in the landscape character area are identified below.

The area lies within the High Weald AONB (apart from two very small areas on the edge of Royal Tunbridge Wells). The following elements of character related to the AONB are particularly valued in this character area:

- 1) The elevated sandstone plateau which enables distant views across the Medway Valley to the ridges of the High Weald in Sevenoaks district.
- 2) The pattern of dispersed farmsteads and hamlets including Groombridge and Ashurst. The settlement pattern is typical of the High Weald landscape. Historic farmsteads - many of which are connected by ancient droveways – oasts, manor houses and historic parks and gardens survive as remnants of the historic evolution of settlement in the landscape. Locally distinctive and historic buildings add important local character to the landscape.
- 3) Rural lanes and footpaths following the routes of ancient droveways.

- 4) Woodland – particularly ancient woodlands. This is of value for many reasons including historic, aesthetic, biodiversity and recreation interest. Large areas of woodland provide a sense of tranquillity and remoteness, where public access allows people to get close to nature. The pattern of woodland, shaws and ghylls also illustrates a historic pattern closely tied to the historic field pattern and farmsteads.

Other features and qualities considered to be of particular landscape and visual value to the character area include:

- 5) The historic field pattern of fields which create a regular pattern and with wavy and some sinuous boundaries, creating a variety in scale and visual interest. They have historic value for representing a time depth in the landscape as well as in combination with the hedgerow field boundaries.
- 6) Strong rural character, with dark skies across the south-west of the area, as a result of a lack of modern intrusions. The largely unspoilt rural landscape provides an important setting to the Conservation Areas at Groombridge and Langton Green.
- 7) The estates and parklands which add a distinctive ornamental character to the landscape. They also serve as visitor attractions, enhancing the recreational value of the area which is crossed by a network of recreational trails and footpaths.
- 8) The broad swathes of permanent and semi-improved pasture on the hill slopes represent an internationally important reserve of acidic and neutral grassland (a BAP priority habitat).

Detractors and Opportunities

In addition to the detractors noted in **Chapter 3**, features which detract from the character area are identified below.

Detractors and Opportunities

- 1) Air traffic noise reduces the sense of tranquillity in some areas.
- 2) Traffic, noise and speed of vehicles travelling along rural lanes reduces the perception of rurality and tranquillity locally.

Landscape Strategy

Borough landscape considerations are detailed in **Chapter 3**, and local objectives are outlined below.

Landscape Strategy

The Local Character Area should be considered in the context of the High Weald AONB, particularly the role the character area plays in the setting of the AONB. The valued features and qualities of the landscape should be conserved and enhanced.

- 1) Ensure that the character of existing settlements is retained, i.e. small-scale, scattered isolated farmsteads and rural buildings without substantial clustered settlements. The ridgetop, rural farmland character of Langton Green should be respected.
- 2) Maintain the locally wooded backdrop and ensure generous tree planting/screening measures using locally native species (oak, hazel, hornbeam) in association with new

development and any existing intrusive structures.

- 3) Any enhancements to historic estates and parklands should promote restoration and management through the development process, including conservation of characteristic estate boundaries, replanting and perpetuation of specimen and parkland trees, and maintenance of distinctive estate buildings and cottages.