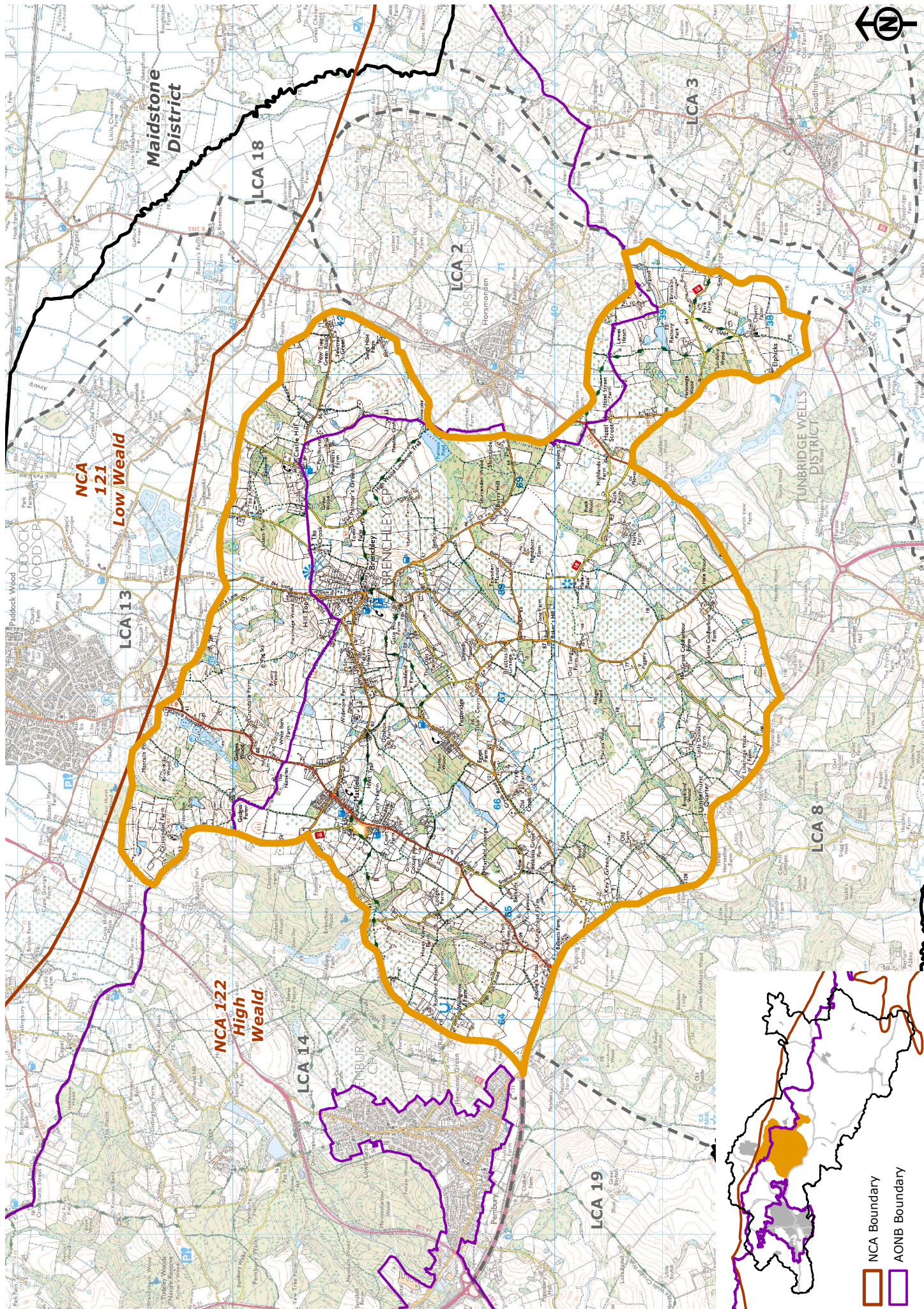


LCA 1 - Matfield/Brenchley Fruit Belt



## SUMMARY

**A broad plateau dominated by orchard fields on the plateau top and rows of dwarf fruit trees on the rolling slopes and ridges. The plateau is cut by more intricate and intimate wooded ghyll valleys, which are crossed themselves by sunken lanes with characteristic woodland verges. A mixture of historic and more modern farmsteads and farm buildings reflect a working, cultivated landscape.**



## Key Characteristics

- 1) **A plateau landscape, consisting of a series of low undulating ridges and intersecting valleys.**

The Matfield and Brenchley Fruit Belt forms part of the high plateau, with a central ridge of Tunbridge Wells Sandstone. Areas of Wadhurst Clay form the slopes that drop down to the Low Weald in the north and the gentle slopes to the south. The area is composed of a series of minor rolling hills and ridges, with undulating orchard-covered slopes. The plateau is cut by small, long streams draining north eastward to the Medway/Hammer Dyke or the Teise, creating more complex, intricate valley topography.

- 2) **The High Weald 'scarp slope' provides extensive views out over the Low Weald to the north.**

In the north of the area the 180 degree view from the public Millennium Viewing Point in Crook Road, creates a strong contrast with the narrow and intimate rural lanes found elsewhere in the area. There are also views to the south, to the rolling wooded hills of the High Weald.

The ridge and the north-facing lower slopes provide a transition between the High Weald and the Low Weald and a setting to the High Weald. The ridgeline provides enclosure and a wooded backdrop to the open, flat landscape of the Low Weald, particularly the more open landscape in and around Paddock Wood to the north.

- 3) **Orchards with regimented ranks of fruit trees and hop poles lend a patchwork and 'gardenesque' quality.**

The soils based on the drift deposits are very varied, but include a wide belt classified as Grade 2 agricultural land, which in part accounts for the intensity of cultivation. Commercial orchards sheltered by tall alder and poplar hedges cover the plateau and slopes.

Rows of apple and pear trees predominate, mainly on dwarf rootstock, with some soft fruit and in combination with occasional hop poles on the slopes, accentuate the topography, forming a complicated patchwork pattern of regular lines on the undulating slopes. This is the defining feature of the area and is particularly strong on the central ridge around Tong Farm.

Isolated remnant old orchards provide a particularly attractive feature. Here, the old orchard trees with their gnarled, mossy bark and delicate pink flowers, scattered in pastures grazed by sheep, are an attractive feature of the area. The abundant orchards and hop gardens together create an active, busy landscape with an almost 'gardenesque' quality.

- 4) **The narrow, wooded ghyll valleys which cut the plateau top create a more intimate, enclosed and ecologically rich landscape.**

Intersecting the patterned orchard plateau are a series of long north-east orientated ancient wooded ghylls with thick woodland precariously clinging to the steep valley sides. Woodlands characteristically contain pedunculate oak over unmanaged ash, hazel and hornbeam coppice with alder common along streams. Occasionally, the woodlands are interspersed with areas of old pasture and meadows along the steep valley sides. These thin strips of ancient broad-leaved woodlands are often hidden in views across the wider landscape from the ridges, creating the perception of a richly textured landscape and a visual contrast between the wooded slopes and open fields.

- 5) **Rural lanes dip down from the open plateau top and into the wooded valleys, winding beneath a network of green, woodland tunnels. These are bound by diverse and colourful hedge banks, important for their ecological diversity.**

Travelling through the area the repetitive pattern and sequence of lanes which twist through a maze of orchards and dip down into the valley, cutting through the sandstone and into the characteristic sunken, tree-lined green tunnels, is one of its most defining and distinctive features. These represent ancient droveways - former lanes used for transhumance, connecting the larger settlements outside of the High Weald to the woodland pastures known as 'dens'.

The roads and lanes are frequently lined and overhung by very thick hedges, woodland strips or shaws of oak, ash, hazel, hawthorn, holly and field maple with diverse and colourful woodland hedge banks with primroses, bluebells, red campion and orchids. The lane verges are a particularly important biodiversity resource as throughout the wider area the intensity of cultivation means that there is very little semi-natural grassland remaining; virtually all is improved or under orchard plantation.

**6) A patchwork with fields of arable and pasture interspersing orchards. Large arable fields in the north-west and occasional large fruit packing stations.**

Interspersed among the orchards are swathes of sheep or horse grazed pastures as well as small parcels of arable land with particular concentrations of pasture on the ridge south of Matfield, the area around Cryals and the small tributary valley of the Teise. In some cases the hedgerow structure has been lost with local areas of wire and paddock fencing becoming significant visual detractors. However in general, individual trees, hedges and areas of woodland provide an important and rich landscape structure.

A different landscape pattern emerges in the north-west part of the area. Here, large open arable fields, surrounded by occasional remnant stag-headed hedgerow oak trees, occupy the gentle slopes which roll down to the Medway valley. This area - for example, the slopes north of Brenchley - forms an area of transition with the Low Weald.

The Matfield/Brenchley Character Area is a working managed landscape, as indicated by the large fruit packing stations, which are sometimes prominent on the ridge tops. There is some evidence of orchard loss and conversion of land to pasture, or in some cases arable, which results in a more open landscape.

**7) The distinctive villages of Matfield, Brenchley and the hamlet of Castle Hill.**

The settlements are located on the ridgeline in the north-west. They are rarely conspicuous in views from the wider countryside although Brenchley Church tower forms a landmark in views – such as in views from Horsmonden and from higher land near Matfield (there are also long distant views from Brenchley Church tower across the High Weald and Brenchley village). Views towards the settlements create a sense of balance and harmony, with red brick hues of buildings making a subtle impression and their intimate scale and loose-knit, more informal character interspersed with green and trees, in comparison with the tight nucleated and visually prominent hilltop settlements at Goudhurst or Speldhurst.

Matfield and Brenchley villages contain a rich variety of historic buildings, providing a strong character and sense of community. Matfield has a village green, and Brenchley a central square, both of which provide settings for historic buildings overlooking them. The villages are designated Conservation Areas.

**8) Historic farmsteads and timber-framed houses are dispersed across the area, creating a harmonious balance with the landscape of woodlands, orchards and fields.**

There are a relatively large number of historic farmsteads, particularly on the higher slopes, which create interesting features nestled in with nearby trees and woodland in longer distance views.

Farm buildings and dwellings include a range of vernacular and more modern styles including a concentration of oasts. Historic farmsteads are particularly strongly associated with the ancient routeways which follow the ridgelines – along the south of the character area, and to the west and north-west. Buildings are generally well-integrated into the landscape, in scale with surrounding mature trees or partially screened behind native hedgerows, and in subtle red or brown hues.

Typical vernacular features include timber-framed buildings, weatherboarding, red brick and red clay hanging tiles. Typical boundary features include low brick walls and clipped hedges and white picket fences and posts in the villages.

**9) Calm, colourful and vibrant rural landscape with relatively dark skies across the whole area**

Small scale development and a lack of lit roads create relatively dark skies extending across the whole area. Rural activity in the working farms and orchards, and the villages of Matfield and Brenchley, results in a landscape full of texture and interest. Access to the countryside via a good network of public rights of way including the High Weald Landscape Trail and large private gardens with visitor facilities, makes the area a popular destination for visitors and walkers to experience the High Weald landscape.

**Evidence of Past Use and Cultural Evolution**

- 1) Visual evidence of the medieval landscape pattern is harder to discern due to intensive and historical use of the land for fruit and hop production. However, the absence of shaw woodland and fields cut from the woodland suggests that this area, like the majority of the fruit belt, may have been cleared of its woodland cover at an earlier stage than other areas.
- 2) Remnants of the Wealden iron industry, including furnace ponds, hammer ponds and old workings. The site of a 16<sup>th</sup> century iron furnace is located at Furnace Pond, close to Horsmonden to which it is connected by Furnace Lane. The iron foundry that this hammer pond powered was one of the major foundries in the area, and is said to have produced cannon and guns for warships including weapons for both sides of the English Civil War.
- 3) From the 14<sup>th</sup> century the Brenchley area had flourished with trades associated with cloth making and the iron industry. The wealth generated from farming and these industries was used to construct timber-framed houses, many of which remain today. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, formal gardens and ornamental parklands were added, with mature oak trees, coppice woodlands woodland rides and ornamental lakes including Rectory Park, Sprivers, Marle Place, Brattles Grange and Brenchley Manor. Some allow visitors – such as Marle Place and Sprivers – where the woods are now managed sustainably by the National Trust. These historic houses and gardens contribute to part of a wider ‘gardens’ landscape across the borough, along with visitor attractions such as Scotney and Sissinghurst.
- 4) Surviving earthworks of a medieval Ringwork in Castle Wood, built on a crest of sandstone and clay spur of Castle Hill overlooking the Low Weald, as part of the Norman defences of the Medway, marks the location of probably the earliest settlement in the character area, and is a designated Scheduled Monument. Ringworks acted as strongholds for military operations, and these defences were built and occupied from the late Anglo-Saxon period to the later 12<sup>th</sup> century.
- 5) The poet Siegfried Sassoon born and grew up in the neo-gothic mansion named Weirleigh, in Matfield. The area was the setting to some of his most famous books including *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, which depicted a cricket match which took place in Brenchley.

**Semi-Natural Landscape and Priority Habitats**

- 1) Designated Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) include Brenchley churchyard, which contains slightly acid grassland and a good number of bryophytes with a rich lichen flora on the tombs and walls, and part of Brenchley Wood LWS.
- 2) Brookland Wood contains a particular variety of woodland stand types including alder *Alnus glutinosa* woodland and a diverse ground flora and is designated a SSSI.

- 3) Shirrenden Woods, Park and Ponds LWS is a mosaic of habitats, comprising a large block of ancient semi natural woodland with an area of wet woodland and unimproved neutral/ slightly acid grassland in the parkland to the east of the wood supporting a diversity of grasses and flowering plants. The Furnace Pond is used for angling.
- 4) Castlehill Wood and Pasture LWS at the site of the medieval Ringwork, contains an area of ancient woodland and semi-improved pasture which is stock-grazed and contains a range of grasses and herbs. Other areas of semi-improved grassland provide important biodiversity in the area including fields near Petteridge and in Brenchley Woods.
- 5) There are several traditional orchards in the north of the character area (orchards managed in a low intensity way with no chemical pesticides) which are BAP priority habitats for the wide range of wildlife they support. The mosaic of habitats may encompass fruit trees, scrub, hedgerows, hedgerow trees, orchard floor habitats, fallen dead wood and associated features such as ponds and streams. These are often associated with historical boundary features such as shaws and historical structures such as hopper huts and tar tanks.

## 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 the area in the north comprising the north-facing slopes that descend into the Low Weald). The following elements of character related to the AONB are particularly valued in this character area:

- 1) The distinctive scarp slopes provide a transition and wooded backdrop to the Low Weald landscape to the north and a setting to the High Weald.
- 2) The dispersed pattern of settlement typical of the High Weald landscape and the small villages of Matfield and Brenchley with their characteristic Wealden buildings. Historic farmsteads– both isolated and associated with roads and tracks including drift way and court yard types add local vernacular character, including oast houses, timber-framed farm buildings and details such as traditional weatherboarding, clay tiles and hipped roofs.
- 3) Ancient routeways that form a clear network of roads and tracks of varying width often associated with ponds, small greens and forstalls. The raised banks with wooded sides which are now local lanes, roads or public rights of way add historic interest to the landscape and which are remnants of the historic practices of transhumance and exploitation of the resources of the forest. The wildflower rich verges of the area are a much valued feature.
- 4) Remnant ancient ghyll valley woodlands, providing value for many reasons including historic, aesthetic and biodiversity interest.
- 5) The scenic beauty created by the harmonious balance between the historic villages and rural landscape, frequent orchards, wooded slopes and open fields and views of the High Weald. Consequently the area is a popular destination for walkers and tourists. Access is available via a good network of footpaths including the High Weald Landscape Trail.

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

- 6) Sense of tranquillity and relatively dark skies across the whole of the area, as a result of a lack of modern intrusions, with settlement contained within the topographical and vegetated framework.

- 7) The distinctive character of the villages of Matfield and Brenchley, with strong focal points around village green, church and historic buildings.
- 8) The association with the nearby old Hawkhurst Branch Railway Line which cuts through the eastern part of the area, providing a potential recreational resource, as well as serving as a reminder of the culture of 'the hop-pickers line' in the wider Fruit Belt.
- 9) The extensive views from the scarp slope at the public Millennium Viewing Point, across the Low Weald to the north provide a transition between the High Weald and the Low Weald.
- 10) The scenic quality and interest created by the undulating ridges, accentuated by rows of fruit trees and the wooded ghylls with occasional views of historic farmsteads, houses with parklands and woodlands, and oasts, connected by rural lanes and green tunnels.
- 11) A strong natural character formed from a mosaic of habitats, so that birdsong and seasonal colours of apples, plants and trees add a sense of vibrancy and activity.
- 12) Remnants of the Wealden iron industry including features such as Furnace Pond.

## 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) Decline of woodland cover through loss and poor management, especially the distinctive strips of ghyll woodland in the valleys.  
*Promote woodland management opportunities and restoration, particularly in the ghylls which are an important landscape feature of this area, in association with development or where grants are available.*
- 2) Signs of intensive farming such as large-scale buildings, including fruit packing stations. In many cases, the hedgerow structure has been lost with local areas of wire and paddock fencing becoming significant visual detractors.
- 3) Busy roads in the village centres and cutting across the wider landscape create a degree of noise and traffic.

## 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 areas of the northern slopes play in the setting of the AONB. The valued features and qualities of the landscape should be conserved and enhanced.

- 1) Conserve and enhance the essentially rural, working agricultural character of this area, ensuring that incremental, small-scale developments do not erode its character.
- 2) Limit further linear development or coalescence of settlements in order to ensure the distinct identity of the individual villages of Matfield and Brenchley is retained.

- 3) Any new farm buildings necessary to sustain the orchard economy, including fruit packing sheds, should be sensitively designed and sited. Ensure new development is appropriate in scale and character to the landscape context. New buildings should avoid visually prominent locations and new development should be well-integrated (e.g. with locally appropriate planting) and maintain the valued features and qualities of the character area. Conversion of historic barns and oast houses to residential and home office uses should retain key characteristic features.
- 4) Ensure boundary features are appropriate to the rural character.
- 5) Potential to enhance tourism in the area – for example using cultural associations such as Sassoon.