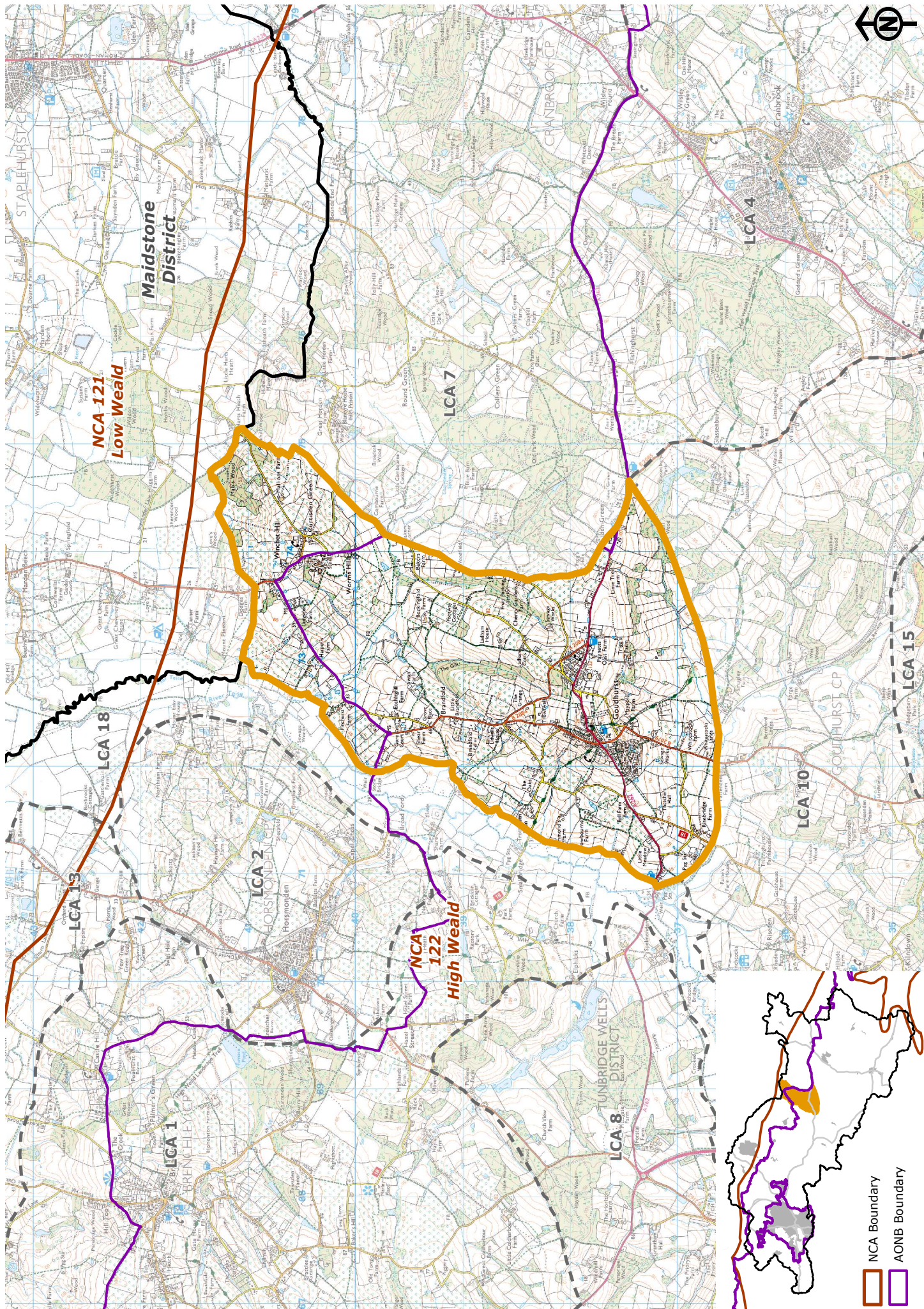


LCA 3 - Goudhurst Fruit Belt



SUMMARY

An intricate rural landscape of orchard and fields which are highly visible in views over the undulating slopes of this high ridge, which climbs up from the Teise Valley. The hilltop village of Goudhurst, with its church tower, is prominent on the skyline from much of the surrounding lower land. The open ridge top affords distant and expansive views out across the High Weald, whilst intervening valleys and wooded land cover create contrasting patterns of enclosure.



Key Characteristics

- 1) **High sandstone ridge landscape that rises steeply from the Teise Valley and provides a dramatic location for Goudhurst village, which is a familiar and visible feature over a wide area.**

The village of Goudhurst is located at the highest point of the ridge, about 120m. The sandstone ridge is cut into to the north and south by small tributaries of the Teise on the Wadhurst Clay, while to the west the Teise valley physically separates and divides Goudhurst. The physical landform, visual dominance of the village of Goudhurst, and a more varied land cover, are the key characteristics which distinguish the area from the wider Matfield-Brenchley Fruit Belt which lies to the west.

- 2) **Dominated by the highly distinctive hilltop village of Goudhurst, with its close juxtaposition of different ages and style of building**

The principal settlement in the area is the hilltop village of Goudhurst, the centre of which is designated a Conservation Area. It is prominent on the skyline, terminating the ridgeline view from much of the surrounding lower land. Goudhurst occupies one of the most dramatic sites in the High Weald, perched on a narrow round-topped ridge above the Teise valley. The hilltop location means that the village has rather inconclusive boundaries, tapering out at the lower end, with more modern twentieth century development extending out from the crossroads.

Historic buildings exhibit a diverse range of styles, including the distinctive Wealden timber framed buildings and sandstone houses, as well as the local vernacular tile and weatherboarding and a number of oast houses. The farms are frequently large-scale buildings, often in association with barns and fruit packing sheds, although many are not visually prominent in the landscape as they tend to be hidden either by tree cover or the landform.

- 3) **Dispersed settlement pattern and a relative lack of modern intrusions with relatively dark skies.**

A number of historic farmsteads and large country houses (including Ladham House and 19th century gardens) are dispersed throughout the wider character area and scattered along winding narrow lanes and ancient droveways. Many of the historic farmsteads date from the medieval period, possibly originating from former 'dens'.

There is a lack of intrusion by modern development (except for the road through Goudhurst which is busy with through-traffic), resulting in a quiet rural landscape of relatively dark skies despite the presence of Goudhurst village. Curtisden Green is a medieval hamlet centred around a village green, overlooked by historic cottages and farmhouses.

- 4) **A network of rural lanes following the routes of ancient droveways.**

The network of historic droveways, tracks and lanes were the former routes used for transhumance – the seasonal movement of people and animals for summer and winter feeding in the woodland pasture (or 'dens'), which generally ended in the High Weald. An ancient routeway to the south of Goudhurst via Smugley Farm is known locally as a smugglers' tunnel, crossing through the ridge.

The High Weald Landscape Trail crosses through the area and part of it follows the route of a ridgetop historic lane. This, in combination with a strong footpath network, enables access and enjoyment for recreation.

- 5) **An intensively managed and intricate rural landscape – a complex patchwork of orchards, occasional hop gardens, pasture, but increasingly also with areas of arable fields.**

Land cover is very varied and includes orchards, mainly dwarf root stock, bound by tall poplar or conifer shelter hedges on the mid-slopes mixed with occasional hop gardens, improved grassland pasture and areas of arable land on the flatter ridge top and the gentler slopes rolling down to the valleys to the south and west. Linear strips of ghyll woodland are hidden in the deep valleys.

Overall, it appears as a busy, productive working landscape although there are some derelict orchards, infested by brambles, or areas where tall hedges shelter improved grasslands, suggesting that fruit trees have recently been removed. This indicates that the traditional 'orchard' landscape is in decline. To the north of the village the landscape is more open and dominated by late 19th and early 20th century orchards together with areas of modern field re-organisation. Field boundaries are also particularly varied; the tall Lombardy poplar and coniferous hedges which shelter the orchards are the most visually distinctive, while the medium-sized pasture and arable fields are generally bound by hawthorn hedges with a scatter of mature hedgerow oak trees.

The pasture fields, orchards and occasional hop gardens create a patchwork chequerboard effect in views across the steep slopes, where the eye is drawn in by the intersecting lines of the tall shelter hedges and regular crisscrossed rows and stripes of dwarf fruit trees.

6) On the steep slopes surrounding Goudhurst semi-improved pastures are an important feature both visually and as a biodiversity resource.

The steeper hill slopes immediately surrounding the village of Goudhurst are covered by semi-improved species-rich neutral grassland and pasture, which in many cases is no longer managed and so is becoming less diverse, but could, with management recover once more.

Large oaks are a feature in hedgerow boundaries. The fields contain burnet saxifrage and salad burnet, with moisture loving plants such as water mint and ragged robin common at the base of the slope. These grasslands are an important feature although they are vulnerable to encroaching and infill development.

7) Panoramas of the High Weald are afforded from the ridge top.

The elevated ridge top occasionally affords panoramas across the surrounding countryside (e.g. from Goudhurst Church) where there are views of the successive dark wooded ridgelines of Bedgebury Forest creating a sense of being on the 'roof' of the High Weald. The arrangement of buildings, roads and lanes and an absence of trees create a series of framed, long distance views from within Goudhurst village across the rural landscape of the Teise valley to St Margaret's Church, Horsmonden, and to the wooded Bedgebury Forest. The tributary of the River Teise in the north of the area around Worms Hill creates distant and distinctive views to and from Curtisden Green and Goudhurst, of natural landform and agricultural fields interspersed with oasts, farmhouses and hop gardens.

Elsewhere the intervening valleys and wooded land cover create contrasting patterns of enclosure, suggesting a more secluded landscape with only occasional long views out.

8) Long thin strips of linear ghyll woodland remain hidden from view on the steep valley sides between the ridges.

Travelling across the area reveals an even greater variety in land cover than is immediately apparent in views across the landscape. Where the lanes dip down into the valleys, the tree lined edges, wooded banks and glimpses of the incised ghyll woodland create a much more intimate feel, in contrast with the patterned landscape of orchards on the mid slopes.

Evidence of Past Use and Cultural Evolution

- 1) Visual evidence of the historic landscape pattern is more limited than some areas due to intensive use of the land for fruit and hop production. However, the relative 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 early period than

most. Goudhurst would have originated as a clearing in the forest.

- 2) Goudhurst developed as a village with a farming community, and remnant assart fields survive on the steep slopes to the south and north-west of the village. However, much of it was rebuilt following a fire in 1380 and it is from the medieval time that the village today is associated - the historic core of Goudhurst is well-preserved, with many features intact. By the beginning of the post-medieval period Goudhurst had a thriving cloth-making industry, a newly emerging iron-working trade and a strong agricultural base.
- 3) In Victorian times the area became a boisterous and colourful annual hop-picking venue for thousands of Londoners, many who arrived on the 'hop-pickers' railway line. This old Hawkhurst Branch Railway Line operated between Paddock Wood and Hawkhurst, and opened in 1892 until the line was closed in 1961. The former station building at Hope Mill was located at the foot of the hill to the south-west of the character area, but has since been demolished. Hop gardens are now less frequent in the area but a few isolated hop gardens remain, as well as its cultural associations which continue in films such as 'Adventure in the Hopfields', a children's film which was filmed in and around Goudhurst in the 1950s.
- 4) Ancient droveways and ironways radiate from a trackway which runs along the ridgeline through the centre of Goudhurst. The village would have grown up around this nodal point and around the church. The location overlooking the river (used for transportation in medieval times) added to its importance. Locally the droveways were also known as smugglers routes, being popular routes for smugglers transporting goods from the Kent coast.
- 5) In 1747 the notorious group of local smugglers known as the Hawkhurst Gang were firmly beaten in a battle between them and a group of local inhabitants.

Semi-Natural Landscape and Priority Habitats

- 1) Very diverse species-rich 'woodland' hedges. These are usually narrow lines as opposed to the characteristic thick shaws found in other parts of the High Weald. Oak and ash standards over a shrub layer of holly, hawthorn and hazel with dog rose, bramble and a rich hedge bank flora, including wild strawberry and lords-and-ladies, are common.
- 2) The productive land use over much of the area has the effect of mainly confining areas of nature conservation interest to the valleys and the thin strips of ghyll woodland (including ancient woodland in the Gill Nature Reserve) and the difficult to cultivate steep slopes around Goudhurst. In this context, the remaining species-rich hedgerows which thread across the area linking areas of woodland are particularly valuable as linear habitat corridors, as are the species-diverse roadside verges.
- 3) 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.
- 4) The semi-improved species-rich neutral grassland and pasture (Goudhurst Pasture) is designated a Local Wildlife Site. It is no longer managed and so is becoming less diverse, but could, with management recover once more.

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 north of the character area at Winchet Hill, Curtisden Green and Finchurst Farm). The following elements of character related to the AONB are particularly valued in this character area:

- 1) The distinctive landform, which provides a dramatic location for the village of Goudhurst, and allows panoramic and framed views to the surrounding High Weald.
- 2) The distinctive hilltop village of Goudhurst with a relatively intact historic settlement pattern and interesting medieval buildings. The village creates a prominent skyline in views from the surrounding landscape and there are distant views from the village to the surrounding High Weald, Teise valley and undulating hillsides.
- 3) The dispersed pattern of settlement typical of the High Weald landscape. Historic farmsteads– both isolated and associated with roads and tracks add local vernacular character, including oast houses, timber-framed farm buildings and details such as traditional weatherboarding, clay tiles and hipped roofs.
- 4) A network of ancient routeways through the area is the remnant of the historic practices of transhumance and exploitation of the resources of the forest.
- 5) Remnant ancient ghyll woodlands, providing value for many reasons including historic, aesthetic and biodiversity interest, illustrating a historic pattern which is no longer widely evident due to the proliferation of orchards in the area.
- 6) The scenic beauty created by the harmonious balance between the historic village and rural landscape, the patchwork of orchards, pasture and wooded slopes and extensive views of the High Weald with contrasting enclosure in valleys and with opportunities for access on foot.

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

- 7) There is a lack of intrusion by modern development (except for roads busy with through-traffic), resulting in a quiet rural landscape of orchards, fields and relatively dark skies.
- 8) Areas of natural biodiversity and visual value including the semi-improved pastures on the steep slopes surrounding Goudhurst are important both visually and as a biodiversity resource and the species-rich 'woodland' hedges which provide rich biodiversity value.
- 9) The association with the nearby old Hawkhurst Branch Railway Line which cuts through the area provides a potential recreational resource, as well as serving as a reminder of the culture of 'the hop-pickers line'.
- 10) The High Weald Landscape Trail crosses through the area and part of it follows the route of a ridgetop historic lane, enabling access for recreation to the surrounding countryside.

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) Coniferous hedges – such as Leyland Cypress detract from the landscape, particularly where they are left unmanaged, restricting views and contributing little biodiversity value.
- 2) Large heavy goods vehicles passing through the centre of Goudhurst village create visual and noise intrusion, and appear out of scale with the predominantly medieval settlement.

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) Retention of the rural, working agricultural character of the area. Further development has the potential to erode this essential rural character.
- 2) Protect the traditional form of Goudhurst as a hilltop village and restrict further spread, either down the slopes or along the ridge top. Ensure new development and alterations including boundary treatments, are in keeping with the local character.
- 3) Protection of the landscape setting of Goudhurst, with its unimproved pastures and orchards. The proliferation of horse paddocks and incremental removal of hedgerows and wooded boundaries should be avoided.