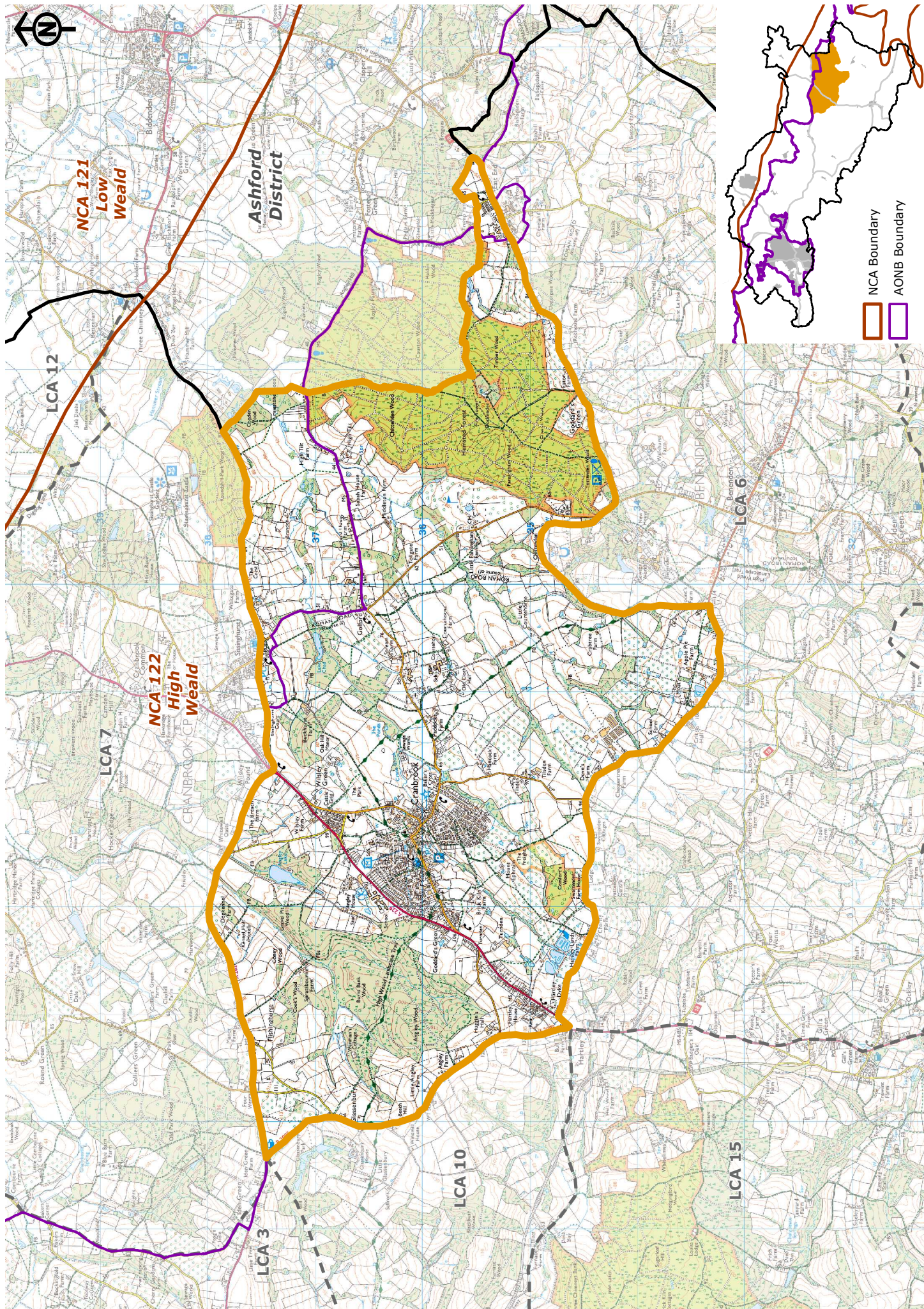


LCA 4 - Cranbrook Fruit Belt



SUMMARY

A plateau-top landscape where the topography flattens out (compared with the more intricate topography of the fruit belt to the west) permitting larger-scale land uses to exist. This is a diverse zone of transition and typical of the High Weald landscape. The strong yet diverse character incorporates elements of fruit belt, forested plateau and wooded farmland and the historic town of Cranbrook.



Key Characteristics

1) Gently undulating upland plateau that shelves towards the north.

A larger-scale plateau top landscape where the slopes flatten out to form subtle valleys, in comparison to the intricately incised ridges and valleys which occur elsewhere. The plateau drops in the north towards the Low Weald and rises in the south to a ridgeline that can be considered to define the southern perimeter of the character area. The action of the Benenden Fault has resulted in ridgelines and uplands, with Tunbridge Wells Sand where the land dips to the north, Wadhurst Clay along the central plateau top, and local alluvium deposits associated with the numerous small streams that flow through the area.

2) Network of small watercourses that have been influential in the development of the area.

The watercourses drain in a south west to north east direction. The most notable of these are the Hammer Stream in the east and the Crane Brook, which was named after the herons and cranes that, historically, flanked its banks.

3) Intermittent views to the surrounding wooded ridges and hills.

The ridgelines and gently undulating hills permit intermittent views within the area, which occasionally stretch for considerable distances across the High Weald in all directions. Particular views highlighted by the local community include the view from Coursehorn Lane south towards Benenden and far reaching views from Hartley to the south and north and views northward from Turnden.

4) Large fields of arable farmland divided by ghyll woodland and with wavy boundaries of hedgerows.

Cranbrook has the poor agricultural soils common to the High Weald with cloddy clays and acidic sands; however, both arable and pasture farming occur. Arable farmland consists predominantly of large crop fields. Ancient shallow ghyll woodlands divide fields and are sometimes adjoined by remnant medieval regular or irregular informal fields. Hedgerows occasionally contain a good structure of hedgerow trees.

The arable land occurs on the large flattest areas of land, particularly where the land shelves towards the north as well as in the area to the south-east of Cranbrook, where large arable fields occupy the ridges, separated by the shallow wooded ghyll valleys.

5) An informal regular pattern of small and medium fields many of which are early medieval or medieval. Fields are characterised by arable, sheep pasture and orchards with thick hedges and shaw boundaries.

The fields are frequently located around the edge of woodland and tend to occupy the high land or the steeper ghyll valley sides. Adjacent to the two main areas of replanted ancient woodland at Angley Wood and Hemsted Forest, medieval assart fields provide a reminder of the ancient farming systems which carved the irregular 'bites' out of the historically wooded areas. Elsewhere areas of historic field patterns – such as co-axial fields south-east of Cranbrook - create a patchwork of arable, pasture and orchard land uses. Here the fields which are laid out in quite a regular pattern provide visual interest with their sinuous and wavy field boundaries and indicate previous enclosure of common land or medieval farming systems. Some orchards retain the small scale medieval field patterns which they replaced, although field boundaries have often been removed.

Many fields are surrounded by a good hedgerow network. Field sizes increase, as does the perception of the field sizes where replacement with post and wire fencing occurs. Hedgerows are predominantly hawthorn, although localised holly hedges are also common to the north of the area.

6) Orchards particularly concentrated around settled areas.

Orchards are particularly concentrated south of Cranbrook and in the north-west and north-east of the area. These are mainly small dwarf trees; however, occasional traditional orchards remain, such as to the south and east of Cranbrook. Orchards generally, are in decline and may disappear from the landscape.

7) High proportion of woodland. To the east this is the large coniferous plantation forest of Hemsted, whereas in the west a more deciduous character is created by Angley Wood.

Woodland, of a variety of species and spatial distributions, is a notable feature of the Cranbrook environment. Hemsted Forest, predominantly a pine plantation, is an ancient replanted woodland and dominates the eastern part of the Cranbrook plateau. The forest creates an enclosed wooded feel and is visible for large stretches of the plateau and from adjoining lowland character areas.

To the west, Angley Wood occupies a small spur of land that extends out from the ridgeway of the B2085. This is also an ancient replanted woodland, and comprises a large block of broad-leaved woodland, containing areas that have been converted to conifer plantation and chestnut coppice. It can be seen from many locations in the wider countryside, and provides a wooded framework for the area.

Smaller areas of deciduous woodlands and ghyll valley woodlands combine with the large wooded blocks to contain a richly wooded and biodiverse landscape. Recreation is closely tied to the areas of woodland, with the High Weald Landscape Trail crossing through Angley Wood, and the open access Hemsted Forest has walking trails and visitor facilities.

8) Settlement contained within the topographical and wooded framework and a pattern of dispersed farmsteads.

Due to the rolling landscape and aspects of land cover, buildings and settlements are usually hidden within the landscape when viewed from afar. Despite its elevated location, even Cranbrook is not prominent in the landscape, generally being well screened by a combination of topography and woodland. There are few views of the town from the adjoining farmland.

The landscape in the east and west of the character area contains relatively little settlement, with only isolated farms and farmsteads. These areas away from Cranbrook town are areas of comparative isolation and have particularly dark skies. The settled areas are served by a network of roads and rural lanes that sub-divide the land into large blocks. In some areas, particularly around the woodland, the landscape appears remote due to the lack of penetrability.

A relatively strong survival of dispersed, isolated historic farmsteads scattered across the area. These are often located on higher ground and associated with ancient droeways or arranged around multiple yards. Many have been altered or converted to houses but nevertheless retain their characteristic features and materials.

9) The small town of Cranbrook has been termed the capital of the High Weald and is the focus of settlement. A distinctive town nestled in the landscape, with a strong vernacular townscape created by various brick, timber and weatherboarded styles with a windmill, cupola on the Big School and sandstone church creating particular landmarks.

Cranbrook is the main settlement of the area. Occasional glimpses of the town reveal a cluster of white weatherboarded or rich earth-toned buildings set within a picturesque framework of trees, particularly Scots Pine, which are a feature of the town. The undulating topography, dense belts of trees and general low building height ensure that the town is generally hidden from view with occasional glimpses of the key landmarks: St Dunstan's church tower (known locally as 'the cathedral of the Weald', the mill and the cupola on Cranbrook School. One of the major landmarks of Cranbrook is the Union Mill, built in 1814. The white and weatherboarded image of the windmill silhouetted against the sky over an intricate red brick roofscape is one of the defining characteristics of the town.

The dense form and historic street pattern create a lively and vibrant character. A broad range of traditional building materials are found including timber-framed buildings, local red brick and clay tiles, and the buildings display a rare range of subtle colours and details such as a rich and varied pattern of different roof shapes. However, new housing estates on the outskirts lack these interesting townscape characteristics.

The name Cranbrook is presumably a derivative of the 'Crane Brook' which runs through the town. The historic and distinctive green wedge penetrates to the heart of the town and is important to its setting. This connection is clearly and expertly expressed by the wooden town signs that mark each entry to the town and provide a strong point of orientation.

The Crane Valley is an integral part of the green infrastructure of the town cutting through the built-up area forming a key element in the setting of the town.

Evidence of Past Use and Cultural Evolution

- 1) Like much of the High Weald Cranbrook was once situated in the ancient forest of Andresweald. In the late Saxon period a settlement appears to have grown up in a clearing where several routes converged to cross the Crane Brook. Cranbrook Conservation Area marks a key node where the ancient routeways converge (Anglely Road/ High Street, Bakers Cross and Waterloo Road). These, in addition to numerous other drove roads across the character area form the basis of the network of rural lanes, and the A229 was originally an ironway. A Roman road also existed, presumably connecting with the Roman iron workings to the south east of the area (now a Scheduled Monument on the west of Little Farningham Wood).
- 2) Cranbrook expanded considerably in the fourteenth century when Flemish weavers settled. Due to its numerous streams, timber and marl deposits, it became the centre of the woollen, weaving and cloth-making industry of Kent. The opulence that arose from this trade is manifested in both the form and quality of the buildings and nearby manors and parklands.
- 3) A cluster of historic designed parklands and historic buildings lie to the north of Cranbrook, including Anglely Park, Oak Hill Manor (previously known as Swifts), Wilsley Manor, Sissinghurst Place, Wilsley Green Conservation Area and the southern part of Sissinghurst Conservation Area. The historic houses and designed parklands reflect the wealth brought about by Cranbrook's weaving industry; the parklands and manors often occupying sites of earlier grand houses, the history of which can be traced back through generations of families. 18th century parklands incorporate ornamental gardens and lakes reflecting their surrounding landscapes. Many features survive today although some are in alternative uses as pasture or equestrian use, such as at Anglely Stud.
- 4) Wilsley Green Conservation Area includes buildings associated with the historic weaving industry. Locally distinctive vernacular materials including red brick, clay tiles and white weatherboarding, with roofs often covered in handmade clay peg tiles. The Conservation Area has a strong visual association with the surrounding landscape, of winding roads, rolling countryside and parkland.
- 5) There is a historic field pattern of small to medium fields which create a regular pattern and with wavy and some sinuous boundaries, as well as areas of orchard creating a variety in scale and visual interest.

Semi-Natural Landscape and Priority Habitats

- 1) Hemsted Forest is an ancient woodland mostly replanted and a LWS, including conifer plantation, sweet chestnut coppice and beech plantation containing a good range of archaeological features. Fringes of original woodland occur along the perimeters containing sessile oak, hornbeam, hazel, holly and occasional alder buckthorn. Damper valleys and dry plateau areas provide a range of habitats for species that would have been present in the original ancient woodland.
- 2) Angley Wood is a LWS and contains a large area of ancient woodland dissected by ghylls. The wood has localised interest due to the boggy flushes occurring where springs emerge from the base of acid sands. On the north-eastern perimeter of the woodland is an area of unimproved acid grassland. The area has a large High Weald woodland complex which supports numerous species of flora and fauna.
- 3) Occasional small traditional orchards are scattered around the character area, which are BAP priority habitats for the wide range of wildlife they support. For example to the east and south of Cranbrook, and in small isolated areas such as near Stream Farm and Dogkennel Farm.
- 4) A section of the Crane river close to the centre of Cranbrook is a Local Nature Reserve, with managed woodland and marshy meadow. It provides natural and recreational amenity for the local population and has raised walkways to provide access.

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 a small area in the far north-east of the character area to the north of Golford Road). The following elements of character related to the AONB are particularly valued in this character area:

- 1) The scenic ridges and wooded ghyll valleys. The ridgelines and gently undulating hills permit intermittent and glimpsed views within the area, which occasionally stretch for considerable distances across the High Weald.
- 2) The pattern of dispersed farmsteads and hamlets, locally distinctive buildings, and the nucleated medieval village of Cranbrook. 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, from small scale forest industry to the successful cloth-making industry in the heart of Cranbrook. Locally distinctive and historic buildings add important local character to the landscape.
- 3) Ancient routeways that form a clear network of roads and tracks. The lush green tunnels and raised banks with wooded sides which are now local lanes, roads or public rights of way add historic interest to the landscape.
- 4) Woodland – particularly ancient woodlands, ghylls and shaws. 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 value of the historic field pattern which show a time depth in the landscape and visual interest in combination with the wooded shaws, ancient woodland and hedgerow field boundaries.
- 6) Sense of tranquillity and dark skies across much of the area, as a result of a lack of modern intrusion, with settlement contained within the topographical and wooded framework.
- 7) The distinctive character of Cranbrook. Its historic street plan and dense development form, the variety and history of buildings of local materials and vernacular styles, including many related to the cloth industry. The interesting and varied roofscape, and landmark features including the Mill and the church.
- 8) The rural setting of Cranbrook, particularly the 'wedge' of landscape provided by the Crane Brook which permeates into the town centre. The relationship of the town with the surrounding landscape is of particular value for the contribution to recreation and views.

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) Impact of busy main roads cutting through the landscape introducing background noise, visual intrusion and movement.

Ensure locally sensitive screen planting, in association with development proposals, along main road corridors to reduce visual impact and the wider infiltration of traffic noise.

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, and the potential role of certain parts of the character in the setting of the AONB. The valued features and qualities of the landscape should be conserved and enhanced.

- 1) Retain the rural character of the area with pockets of comparative isolation.
- 2) Control the location, amount and style of further development to prevent intrusion of built forms on the landscape and avoid deterioration of the currently high quality built environment and vernacular heritage, particularly proximate to Cranbrook. The historic core of Cranbrook must retain its important rural setting. General low-density sprawl that is out of character with the tight-knit character of the existing town should not be permitted. Ensure boundary treatments are appropriate to the surrounding character, whether in the town or countryside.
- 3) Maintain the wooded framework with its associated ecological value, in particular the conservation of the framework of remnant hedgerow trees in the large arable fields. Pursue sustainable woodland management techniques to maximise the contribution that

the plantation, ghyll and semi-natural woodlands make to the visual and ecological qualities of the landscape. Gap up and restore/manage the hedgerows, which together create the landscape structure.

- 4) Control the proliferation of hobby farms, ensuring features such as paddocks and fencing do not incrementally degrade the character and quality of the landscape.
- 5) Protect the Crane Valley stream and associated woodland from further development by use of suitable buffers and improved management.