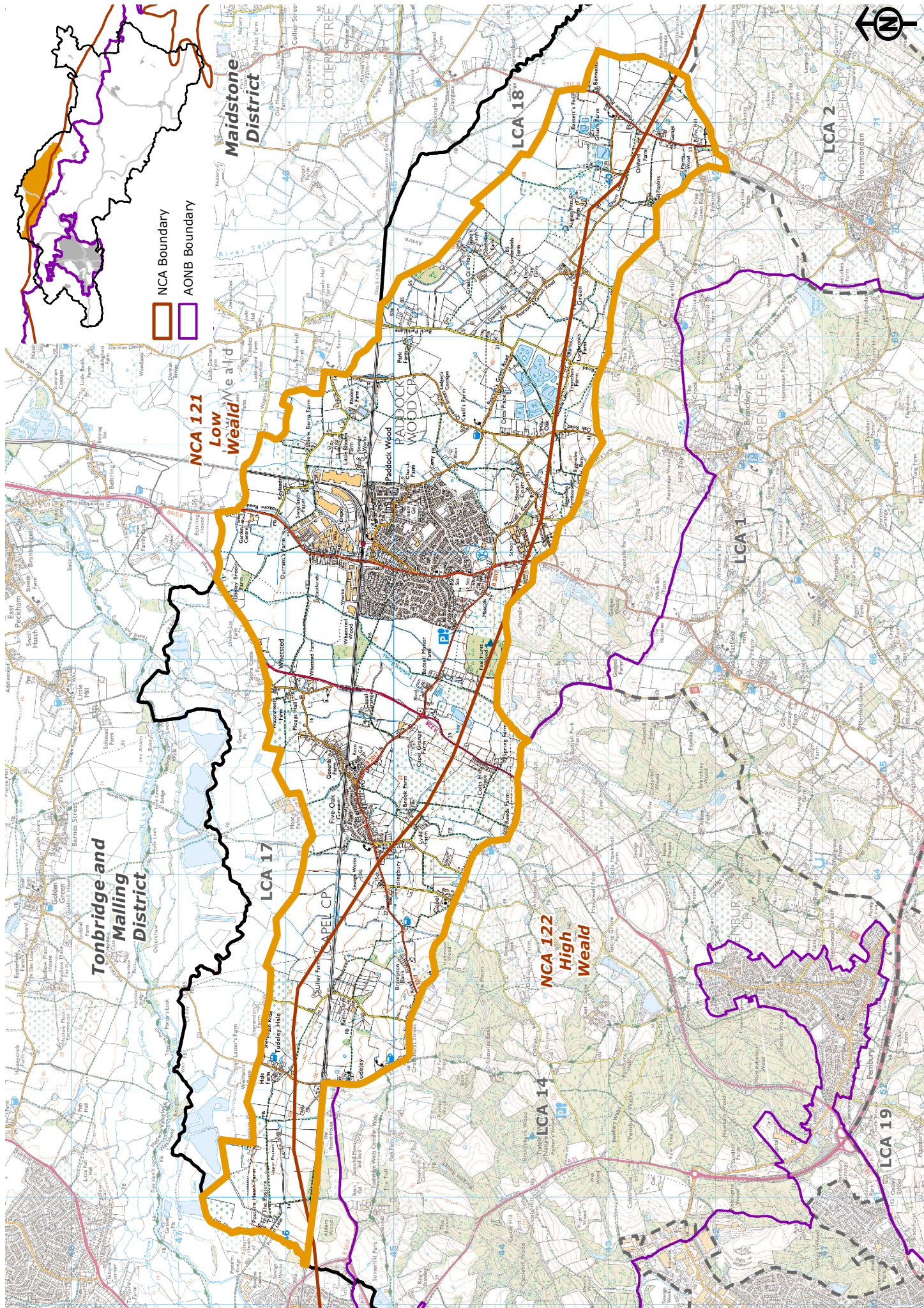


LCA 13 - Paddock Wood/Five Oak Green Low Weald Farmland





## SUMMARY

This area occupies the gentle footslopes of the High Weald and is an important transition between the Fruit Belt and the flat arable and pasture land of the Low Weald and the Medway valley from which it derives much of its character. It is an agricultural landscape with extensive arable fields and local areas of fruit orchards and includes the urban area of Paddock Wood, which has grown up around the rail station.



## Key Characteristics

### 1) **Flat or gently undulating land at the footslopes, backed by the adjacent ridge of the High Weald plateau.**

The area is geologically and topographically distinct, with the boundary broadly following the 40m AOD contour line at the junction of the clay vale with the sandstone dominated upland plateau. It is also visually distinctive, with a clear and sudden transition experienced when travelling on the lanes which lead down from the High Weald (e.g. from Castle Hill), or from the Millennium Viewing Point near Brenchley, where the landscape abruptly opens out revealing immense panoramas of the Low Weald. The ridgeline of the High Weald to the south provides enclosure to this otherwise fairly open, flat landscape.

### 2) **A mixed farmed landscape with extensive open arable fields, dwarf fruit orchards and pockets of pasture.**

Land cover is distinctly different from that of the High Weald. On the well-drained soils and gentler slopes there is intensive arable cultivation with large open fields of crops replacing the haphazard pattern of orchards dissected by thin ghyll woodlands. Current agricultural land use includes arable crops, top fruit, and grass, with agricultural production restricted by waterlogging and summer drought. Horticultural and arable crops have replaced many areas previously dedicated to orchards and hops.

Around the town of Paddock Wood the soils are subject to varying degrees of waterlogging due to a combination of high water tables and slowly permeable subsoils. In some areas the installation of field drains can help to overcome this but this characteristic limits the use for these areas.

Orchards of dwarf apple trees are present but on the flatter land of the Low Weald the orchards do not create the same patterns and visual interest as on the undulating slopes of the High Weald and in places present a rather flat and open landscape.

A richer more diverse landscape pattern occurs on the undulating slopes around Capel and Tudeley where a historic field pattern of fields with wavy and irregular boundaries are separated by thicker hedges of locally distinctive hornbeam. Elsewhere, land may not still be actively farmed and is used for hobby farming or horse grazing, particularly in the area surrounding Paddock Wood, where there is a characteristic range of post and rail and barbed wire fencing.

It is evident that many hedgerows have been removed and their position remains marked by low ridges. Elsewhere, hawthorn hedges form long, low oblong 'boxes'. Mature hedgerow oak trees often remain at irregular intervals along the former hedgeline and now impart an almost parkland quality to the arable landscapes. However, they are declining as indicated by a number of stag-headed trees, with cultivation occurring right up to the hedge base, although the stag-headed trees themselves remain an ecologically valuable feature of the landscape. Where extensive, large arable fields occur, a simple unity is re-established but at the cost of local variety, colour and features in the landscape.

### 3) **Remnant alder or poplar windbreaks, as well as individual trees and hedges provide vertical elements in this open flat landscape.**

The tall shelter hedges were planted to protect orchards and frequently remain along the roadsides after the orchards have been removed. Individual trees including mature oaks and willows as well as hedgerows lining roads or field boundaries, create visual interest and a landscape structure, providing framed views to the landscape beyond – both distant views (to the wooded ridge to the south) and near views to orchards and farms.

### 4) **Crossed by a connecting network of rural lanes characterised by broad grass verges and ditches, hedges or trees.**

A network of rural lanes crosses the area. These often make abrupt right angled turns as they skirt the edges of fields or where they intersect with the north-south ancient routeways descending from the High Weald. These ancient droveways were historically used for transhumance, connecting the larger settlements of the North Downs and the North Kent Plain to the wood pasture, or 'dens' of the High Weald. Some, such as Church Lane, Capel, retain wooded banks at either side. Other lanes are lined by deciduous hedges and remnant hedgerow trees.

The railway line slices through the character area, the moving trains providing an identifiable feature within the sometimes homogenous landscape.

**5) Large, arable fields drained by a network of ditches.**

A network of ditches has been created because of the location of the area near to the floodplain of the River Medway. On the valley floor, this drainage has provided better quality soils, although the large, semi-regular field patterns produce a flat and open, intensively farmed appearance in places.

**6) Very mixed settlement pattern with extensive suburban development at Paddock Wood and on a smaller scale at Five Oak Green, with the remainder of settlement characterised by dispersed farmsteads and small hamlets.**

This is one of the few parts of the Borough that is not covered by an AONB designation. The area has consequently accommodated a substantial amount of new development in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including single rural dwellings alongside roads and lanes in the wider countryside and large centres of development at Paddock Wood and Five Oak Green. The settlement pattern essentially comprises large-scale arable farm complexes which are highly visible elements in the landscape, small hamlets with a handful of dwellings such as Tudeley Hale and Capel and scattered dwellings alongside the lanes.

**Paddock Wood** is a town which has grown up mainly since the 1950s around the rail station. Initially it was an agricultural centre, with buildings including the grain drying store and hops marketing board warehouse adjacent to the railway. Extensive red brick suburban development now extends to the south of the station, with large-scale warehouse and industrial development to the north abutting the orchard landscapes.

**Whetsted** is a small, quiet dispersed linear hamlet of scattered houses and farms, vernacular oasts and brick and tile infilled by more modern 20<sup>th</sup> century development.

**Five Oak Green** is a modern linear development, which sprawls along the busy B2017 road. There is extensive suburban development backing the road and an abrupt transition with the farmland beyond. The village green provides a focal point and local character.

**Capel** and **Tudeley**, by comparison, are small medieval hamlets, with traditional buildings clustered around the Grade I listed sandstone churches. The stained glass windows at Tudeley's All Saints Church were designed by the early modernist artist Marc Chagall. The hamlets have strong vernacular character and focal points with frequent glimpsed views to the surrounding agricultural landscape.

**7) A variety of building styles ranging from groups of oasts, which are highly visible, to more modern suburban houses and bungalows.**

There are a large number of oast houses which are frequently visible throughout the landscape. Many are associated with small historic hamlet groupings, with many surviving from the medieval period, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The oasts are very distinctive features within this open landscape. Many are now converted for residential use.

There are also numerous traditional historic buildings typical of the Weald, including timber framed houses and farmsteads. Vernacular materials include red brick, weatherboard, tiled roofs, hanging tile elevations, gable ends hipped or half-hipped roofs.

**8) Open views across this intensively farmed landscape are frequently punctuated by the cowls of clustered groups of oast houses and extensive farm building complexes. The**



**Greensand Ridge to the north provides a distinctive skyline, whilst the High Weald to the south provides wooded enclosure.**

A variety of building styles ranging from groups of oasts, which are highly visible, to more modern suburban houses and bungalows. Large-scale farm units, incorporating silos and extensive storage sheds located intermittently but prominently throughout the flat open landscape.

Views out across the agricultural landscape provide a sense of rural calm, with the Greensand Ridge providing a distinctive skyline in views towards the north. Throughout the area the enclosing ridgeline of the High Weald to the south is an important feature, creating a wooded backdrop to this otherwise fairly open, flat landscape.

**Evidence of Past Use and Cultural Evolution**

- 1) Historically this was an agricultural landscape consisting of fields with occasional copses of trees and field boundaries. Former extraction pits and field ponds are common features in the landscape possibly indicating the practice of 'marling' (a medieval practice which continued up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century) which involved digging pits and using marl for improving the soil. This was typical in the clay soils of the Weald and tends to leave a landscape of fairly irregular fields with wavy boundaries and ponds.
- 2) Historic drove roads and ironways ran in straight lines in a north-south direction. These lines are today followed by main roads which cross the area.
- 3) The old Hawkhurst Branch Railway Line cuts through the area. Known locally as 'the hop-pickers line', it operated between Paddock Wood and Hawkhurst, opened in 1892 until the line was closed in 1961. It was known for bringing hop-pickers each season from London's East End. A number of features from the Hawkhurst Branch have been retained such as the valances along the platform canopies, the main platform and some short sections of track remain to the east of the station. Paddock Wood station predates the Hawkhurst Branch line, originally built as a station along the Redhill to Ashford South Eastern Railways line in 1842 and is now operational as part of the Paddock Wood – Tonbridge line. The village of Paddock Wood quickly developed around the station.
- 4) Hop Pickers Huts at Hardlots, north of Pearson's Green – these were huts providing accommodation for hop pickers. Built sometime between 1843 and 1875, their survival is relatively rare as they are being lost to redevelopment.

**Semi-Natural Landscape and Priority Habitats**

- 1) Foal Hurst Wood is an area of replanted ancient woodland and a Local Nature Reserve. It also contains meadowland at its northern border. A network of footpaths enables public access. Whetsted Wood is also an area of ancient woodland.
- 2) There are a small number of semi-natural woodland copses, including ash and hazel coppices and, on the lower land, some areas of damp, alder woodland. Small oak copses occur towards the High Weald, as at Foal Hurst Wood. These are important features and contribute to the wooded character of the ridgeline.
- 3) Much of the land is used for intensive arable farming or fruit production and only very small isolated fragments of woodland and patches of semi-improved pasture remain.
- 4) There are several areas of traditional orchards with historic field boundaries –such as at Colts Hill Place. Such areas are managed in a low intensity way and therefore identified as a BAP priority habitat for the wide range of wildlife they support. The mosaic of habitats may encompass fruit trees, scrub, hedgerows, hedgerow trees, orchard floor habitats and fallen dead wood.



- 5) Drainage ditches and channels, which run alongside some field boundaries and lanes, provide important bankside habitats, and can provide foraging corridors for animals such as water voles and bats.

## 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.

This area lies adjacent to the High Weald AONB. There are strong associations between this area and the AONB and the area enhances the character of the AONB landscape. The following key qualities related to the AONB are particularly valued in this character area:

- 1) The slopes in the south of the area which rise up to the High Weald and provide an important transition between the High Weald to the south and the Low Weald. The extensive, panoramic views from within the AONB from the scarp slope at the public Millennium Viewing Point in Brenchley which look across the whole of the character area, and across the Low Weald.
- 2) A network of ancient routeways through the area which continue into the AONB, 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.
- 3) Frequent historic farmsteads and oasts are conspicuous features in the landscape. These add local vernacular character typical of the Weald and the AONB, including oast houses, timber-framed farm buildings and details such as clay tiles and hipped roofs.

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

- 4) Areas which retain a sense of the historic landscape, where the irregular and sinuous field boundaries are overlaid on more undulating slopes, divided by hedgerows and trees – particularly around the small hamlets of Tudeley and Capel.
- 5) The hamlets of Tudeley and Capel which retain strong vernacular character as well as views to the surrounding countryside.
- 6) The old Hawkhurst Branch Railway Line which cuts through the area and provides a local ecological and potential recreational resource, as well as serving as a reminder of the culture of ‘the hop-pickers line’ and the local hop industry in the area.
- 7) Areas of woodland, trees and hedgerows – particularly the small remaining fragments of ancient woodland, which are particularly important for visual character as they are relatively fragmented in places, as well as being important for recreation and biodiversity.
- 8) Traditional orchards which are managed in a low intensity way provide habitat mosaics along with a network of hedgerows, mature oak trees, wide grass verges and occasional woodlands.

## 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) Extensive suburban residential development at Paddock Wood and, to a lesser extent, at Five Oak Green, often with a flat and open urban/rural interface. The settlements are frequently ringed by poorly managed urban fringe countryside. Large buildings on the edge of Paddock Wood are visually conspicuous due to their white or light colour which contrasts with the surrounding green/ brown landscape.

*New development around the edge of existing settlements should be unobtrusive and tie in with the local landscape character through appropriate planting treatments. It would be beneficial to target landscape enhancements anywhere but most importantly along the transport corridors and settlement margins.*

- 2) A proliferation of urban fringe land uses including machinery storage/haulage, particularly on the flatter land around Paddock Wood.
- 3) Pockets of degraded farmland where post and barbed wire fencing has replaced hedgerows and buildings associated with paddocks or hobby farming occur.

*Enhancements should aim to promote sympathetic management of this land to retain its countryside character, particularly in association with development proposals.*

- 4) Conifer hedges are also a locally dominant feature and occur in association with the rural residential development scattered along the roads and lanes.

*More appropriate species of hedges should be sought as appropriate.*

- 5) The pylons which cut across the foot of the slope can be a significant visual detractor.

## 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) Respect the vulnerability of the slopes rising up to the south to new developments/land use change. New developments can be highly visible over a wide area on these slopes and detract from the essential countryside character.
- 2) Consider the vulnerability of this open lowland landscape to built development which is likely to be very visible in views. Pylons which cross east to west, at the foot of the High Weald slope, are a significant visual detractor within this flat, open landscape.
- 3) Ensure that any urban/suburban edges are tied into the local landscape through planting (e.g. hedges, shelter belts, small woodland copses and orchards) as well as ensuring an appropriate graduation in scale of built development to create an appropriate setting and sympathetic transition from urban to rural.