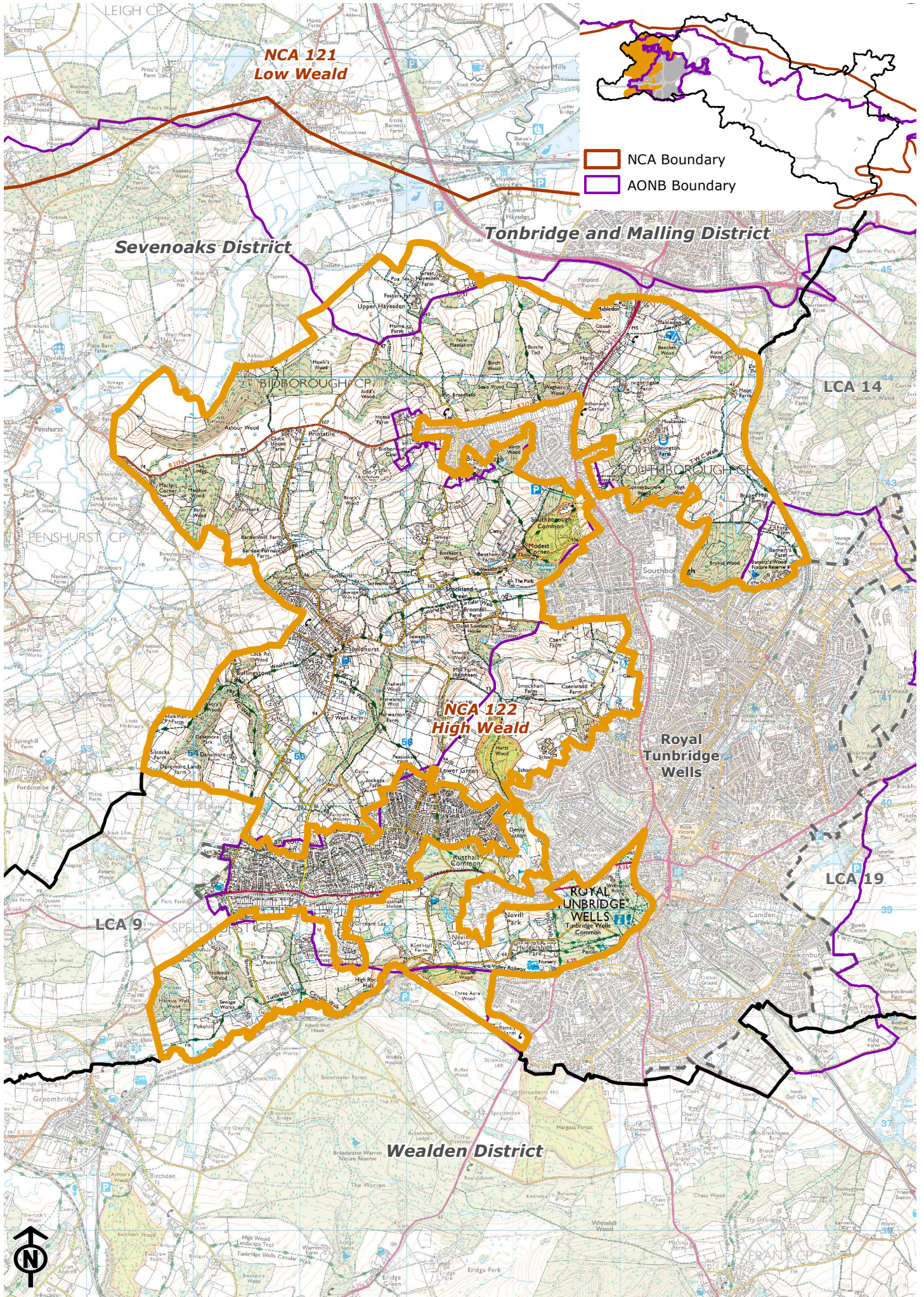


LCA 5 - Speldhurst Wooded Farmland



SUMMARY

A topographically distinct landscape of high ridges intersected by a complex network of valleys and steep sided ghylls extending west from Royal Tunbridge Wells. The landscape is distinguished by weathered outcrops of sandstone, lush, deep ravine woodlands, sunken lanes running between high banks of sandstone, beech and holly hedgerows, Commons which permeate into the centre of Royal Tunbridge Wells and an important swathe of remnant unimproved pasture.



Key Characteristics

1) Complex topography with open, smooth ridges of sandstone radiating out from Royal Tunbridge Wells, cut by deep tributary valleys.

The whole area is underlain by hard, Tunbridge Wells sandstone which radiates out in high ridges, dropping to the Medway valley, to the north-west and north, and the Groombridge fault to the south. The distinct topography comprises smooth, open ridges which have been cut and dissected at the base by tributary streams merging from springs at the junction of the sandstone and softer Wadhurst clays. Chalybeate springs are found throughout the area, which have a high iron content and distinct rust colour. Below the open ridges, a network of tributary valleys create a complex, intricate landform of narrow and steep-sided ghylls.

2) Conspicuous outcrops and crags of sandstone which have been weathered into unusual, distinctive forms.

The presence of the underling sandstone geology is notable throughout the area. Isolated sandstone crags and rocky outcrops are a very distinct feature and include The High Rocks, on the Tunbridge Wells/East Sussex border, Wellington Rocks on Royal Tunbridge Wells Common, and Toad Rock on Rusthall Common. Weathering of the softer, surrounding earth has sculpted these rocks into unusual, often spectacular forms. In addition, massive blocks of bedrock are often exposed along sunken lanes and the soft, warm glow of sandstone is a feature of many of the area's fine buildings.

3) Hedgerows dominated by holly and beech with areas of gorse common in boundaries and verges.

Gorse on verges and within field boundaries is indicative of the underlying, acidic bedrock.

4) Varying field sizes from large-scale open pasture and arable on the ridge tops to small, irregular fields within the valleys.

The light, free-draining sandy soils on the ridges make this a largely pastoral, farmed landscape. The higher land within the area, for example around Speldhurst, is open and includes extensive fields of improved pasture as well as some areas of arable land. Here, beech and holly hedges tend to be narrow and vulnerable to removal through field enlargement. Large farm buildings and barn complexes can also be prominent within the landscape.

Deeply incised valleys (such as in the area between Speldhurst and Tunbridge Wells) are characterised by a relatively intact medieval field pattern of assart fields intermixed with small areas of ancient woodland.

5) Small villages on the ridge tops, with church spires and towers at Bidborough, Southborough, Speldhurst and Rusthall, are prominent skyline features.

The main settlements within the area are nucleated ridgetop villages. There are also more informal settlements around areas of common land. These were built by commoners who enjoyed rights for activities such as grazing and turf cutting. Modest Corner, on Southborough Common and Lower Green at Rusthall are good examples.

Dispersed rural dwellings, farm buildings and occasional oasts are prevalent across the whole area. There are a number of historic farmsteads, often on the lower hill slopes and closely associated with ancient routeways that cross north-south across the landscape.

Churches form local landmarks, for example St Mary's Speldhurst, which forms a distinctive landmark in views in the surrounding area, as well as in views from the western part of Royal Tunbridge Wells.

Speldhurst is a medieval nucleated ridge-top village. There are occasional attractive views to the east over the valley but overall views are limited by high hedges. It has retained its historic pattern around the church, and its rural character of the pastoral surroundings. Typical

vernacular materials include timber-framed buildings, sandstone and clay bricks and tiles, and hedges, sandstone wallings and trees creating boundaries, which imparts a rural village character.

6) Ornamental designed parklands and country estates on the ridge tops.

The parklands include Salomon's House designed by Decimus Burton, Mabledon, Bentham Hill House, Danemore Park, Beacon Hotel Cold Bath and Tea Gardens and Broomlands. The typical 19th century parklands offer a distinct contrast of irregular sweeps of pastures, interspersed with elegant clumps of trees of oak and beech, formal lawns, lakes and woodland walks. Some estates have distinctive boundary fences and lodges, which contribute to the ornamental feel of the landscape. The landscape architect Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe designed a raised terrace garden at Danemore, implemented in 1991.

Designed to appreciate the views of the undulating ridges of the surrounding High Weald landscape, the parklands are located close to Royal Tunbridge Wells and reflect the influence of the town as a place for leisure, recreation and its gentrification during the late post-medieval and early modern periods.

Building styles and materials are varied with fine-grained sandstone being a defining feature of many houses and churches.

7) Extensive, panoramic views available out across surrounding countryside and open hill tops.

The high ground provides long and panoramic views out over the surrounding wooded ridges and valleys of the High Weald countryside. Views across successive open ridgetops are often deceptive, concealing the complicated landscape of twisting valleys and steep ghylls below which are sometimes perceived as 'hidden places'. There is a rich diversity of views, with church spires and village rooftops in one direction and rural, open views with trees and no visible development on another.

Views from the ridgetops, include the view from Barden Road, Speldhurst, the views north and south from Bidborough Ridge, the views to and from Speldhurst and Stockland Green and the views west across the Medway Valley from the extreme south-west of the area near Danemore Park, and Cock Pit Wood over to Chartwell/ Pembury. There are also scenic views to the wooded skyline of the Pembury character area 14 including Castle Hill, from the north-east of Royal Tunbridge Wells.

8) Long, narrow ghyll woodlands, hidden within deep clefts of the valleys, support a particularly rich, lush vegetation cover.

Within the valleys, long, narrow and ancient ghyll woodlands such as Shadwell Wood, Sprouds Wood and Avery Wood are hidden in deep clefts, almost invisible in the views across the landscape. A rich assemblage of flora and fauna including ferns, mosses and liverworts thrive in the shady, humid conditions of these deep, damp ravines.

Larger blocks of ancient woodland are also present in the landscape. A very extensive area of conifer plantation and broad-leaved coppice occupies the north-west facing slopes above the Medway valley at Ashour Wood and Hawks Wood to the west of Printstile. On the edge of Tunbridge Wells, woodlands such as Brokes Wood, Waghorn's and Hurst Wood contain public rights of way, allowing access to nature for local residents. Smaller ancient woodlands such as Beeches Wood to the north of Southborough, contain a mixture of oak standards, chestnut plantation, alder, ash/ field maple/ hazel coppice and a wide variety of understorey species and ground cover including bluebell, bramble, dog's mercury, honeysuckle and wood spurge. A number of deep, damp hollows which may be old marl pits support a range of flora.

Speldhurst/ Shadwell Woods are associated with Baden-Powell, who lived in Speldhurst Manor House.

9) Commons, permeating the built up areas of Royal Tunbridge Wells and Southborough, retain remnants of their former heathland character.

The heathland character evident on parts of the commons at Rusthall, Southborough and Royal Tunbridge Wells reflects the fact that, historically, these areas were not enclosed for agriculture purposes other than grazing. Many of the commons have today scrubbed over with beech, oak, birch and holly, although pockets of heather and bilberry give a clue to their former open character, which was previously managed through grazing by livestock until the middle of the 20th century. The open character of Tunbridge Wells Common formerly allowed unrestricted views from Mount Ephraim to the town centre.

The Commons permeate into the town centre and trees and vegetation form a background to many views from within built-up areas - either in glimpsed vistas between buildings or in filling the horizon in distant views. The changes in level of Tunbridge Wells Common generates important vistas and broad views southward and eastward over the town. The Commons are designated Conservation Areas and are important historically as a main component in the evolution and formation of the settlement, as well as at a more strategic scale, providing balance between developed and undeveloped areas and a boundary between town and countryside right to the town centre.

10) Networks of narrow lanes following ancient routeways, descend and climb the valleys and ridges. Dark tunnels of holly and steep banks of sandstone are distinctive features.

Where the lanes cut down the middle slopes, massive sandstone banks, bound by the gnarled roots of beech trees, are an especially attractive feature, for example at Speldhurst Hill. Ferns flourish in the shady, damp crevices between the rocks. Along some lanes, dark tunnels are formed by overarching holly hedges.

The ancient routeways predominantly run north to south and link to ridgetop routeways across the High Weald. These historic droveways 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’), which were generally remote areas in the High Weald.

11) Broad swathes of permanent and semi-improved pasture on the hill slopes represent an internationally important reserve of acidic and neutral grassland.

An especially valuable feature of the area is the large swathe of unimproved and semi-improved pasture which occupies the slopes below the ridge tops. These fields are distinguished from improved grassland by their rougher texture, floral diversity and subtle green tones. They are especially prominent on the slopes east of Speldhurst. 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, as illustrated, for example, in the valley at Bullingstone.

12) Haysden surrounded by open, pasture valley.

This is a local difference in landscape character, which is an important strategic gap between Royal Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge. Despite its proximity to the towns, this area retains a pleasant, rural, farmed character.

13) A relative rural character despite its proximity to Royal Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge. Well served by recreational routes allowing good access to nature.

The steep topography and wooded slopes combined with little sense of modern intrusions in the heart of the area (such as main roads) provides a sense of rural quiet despite the proximity of the area to the towns of Royal Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge. A lack of street lighting generates relatively dark skies, particularly in the west of the area.

The Tunbridge Wells Circular Walk and Wealdway recreation routes loop through the area and link with a network of local footpaths, bridleways and toll rides across ridges, along valleys and through woodlands.

The prominence of the landscape in views – particularly in helping to define a strong ‘edge’ to Royal Tunbridge Wells, contributes to a landscape with individual villages of very distinct and

separate identities. The Bidborough Ridge in the north of the area and the surrounding countryside contributes to a sense of separation between Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells and ensures the area of countryside in between the towns has a distinct rural character – for example, views towards the wooded Bidborough ridge from the north (e.g. along the A21) provides an important setting and approach to Tunbridge Wells.

Evidence of Past Use and Cultural Evolution

- 1) There is evidence of prehistoric activity in the area including Mesolithic communities using rock outcrops for shelter and the use of land as wood pasture for pigs. Although parts were within the hunting chase for the Clares of Tonbridge Castle in the 11th and 12th centuries, it was sparsely populated until the mid-14th century
- 2) From the 16th century there were a number of features serving the iron industry across the area. A number of water-powered furnaces on the two streams were used to power mills for iron smelting (at Modest Corner and Southborough Bourne – including Vauxhall Furnace near Mote Farm) and the pond at Brokes Wood. In the 18th century the area was known for gunpowder manufacture – possibly based at Barden Furnace.
- 3) The Commons are relict landscape features of the medieval period and on Southborough Common the close association with the coppice wood of the adjacent Whortleberry Wood is a typical feature of common land with grazing and other land use rights. The woodland would have provided under wood and other woodland resources for the commoners, adjacent to the area of wood pasture.
- 4) Drove roads and ironways were located on the high ridges, one of the first areas to be cleared of forest.
- 5) The earth works of an Iron Age hill fort (designated as a Scheduled Monument) are located at High Rocks.
- 6) The village of Rusthall developed during the mid-17th century to accommodate visitors to Tunbridge Wells following its growth as a spa town and resort after the discovery of a Chalybeate spring there in 1606. A former early 18th century pleasure garden at Beacon Hotel Cold Bath and Tea Gardens included a spring-fed cold bath and a series of three descending ponds, set in a wooded valley south of Rusthall Common and to the west of Tunbridge Wells. Its features were incorporated into a tea garden in the early 19th century and subsequently, into the private garden of an 1894 house (Rusthall Beacon). Today the property is run as a hotel.
- 7) 'Hurst' is a common element in place names in and around Tunbridge Wells Borough, meaning wooded 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.
- 8) Rusthall and Tunbridge Wells Commons was popularised during the early 1800s as a place of recreation and recuperation for local people as well as the wealthy. There was a racecourse on Tunbridge Wells Common until the mid-19th century.
- 9) Southborough became a popular destination for visitors from the 17th century. It was generally frequented by gentry and was the royal choice for holidays. Attractions included a bowling green, walking and dancing, much of which took place on the Common.
- 10) The landscape of the area is celebrated in the 19th century picturesque paintings of Tattershall Dodd, a renowned local artist.

Semi-Natural Landscape and Priority Habitats

- 1) The sandstone outcrops at High Rocks and Toad Rock support bryophytes (moss, lichen and liverworts) of national importance. Both are designated Sites of Special Scientific Interest. These and other sandstone outcrops are also important for archaeological deposits.
- 2) Large swathes of important unimproved and semi-improved pasture occupy the slopes below the ridge tops. Bidborough Woods and Pastures and Broomhill and Reynold Lane Pastures are both designated LWS for the mosaic of semi-improved and unimproved pastures and woodland on acid soils. Large sites of unimproved and improved grassland at Southborough Cemetery, Danemore Farm, Brokes Wood and Rusthall Common support a diversity of wildflowers.
- 3) Shaw and ghyll woodlands are remnants of ancient woodland cover and represent an important biodiversity resource. Freizland Wood is a LWS and ancient woodland which also includes areas of wet woodland, a BAP priority habitat. Avery's Wood is another LWS containing woodland over steep-sided ghylls.
- 4) Ashour Wood is a relict ancient woodland, recorded as a LWS. It is actively managed and includes mature oak and beech with chestnut coppice and areas of mixed coppice of hazel, field maple, ash and birch.
- 5) The gravestones, boundary walls and steps of Speldhurst churchyard provide a habitat for a rich assemblage of ferns, lichen, liverworts and moss.
- 6) The commons are an important reservoir of biodiversity and their nature conservation interest is currently being enhanced through active management – such as clearance to promote of heathland regeneration on Tunbridge Wells Common. The sites contain mosaics of relict acid grassland with sandstone outcrops and small areas of dry and wet heathy vegetation and extensive areas of secondary woodland and scrub. The Commons support an extensive number of invertebrate fauna species which benefit from the wide diversity of habitats.
- 7) Barnett's Wood Nature Reserve is located to the north of High Brooms. It contains ancient broadleaf woodland, flower rich meadows, hedges and ponds. There is also a sculpture trail and woodland walks including an access for all path. Woodlands typical of the High Weald include oak and birch, remnant wood pasture and wet woodland. Bluebells, coppicing, ride and glade management helps to maintain the structure that encourages species of bird to breed.

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 scenic and distinctive topography of high ridges intersected by a complex network of valleys and steep-sided ghylls. Weathered sandstone outcrops and sunken lanes between sandstone banks are particularly distinctive features.
- 2) The dispersed historic settlement pattern of isolated historic farmsteads and medieval nucleated hilltop villages.

- 3) The network of ancient routeways which are now ridge-top roads and lanes.
- 4) The frequent and extensive areas of woodland much of which is ancient, in the form of ghylls, shaws and small woodlands.
- 5) The pattern of small intact irregular fields within the valleys, bounded by assart woodlands, hedges and wooded shaws, which reflect a medieval historic landscape character.
- 6) Extensive and panoramic views out across the High Weald to ridges, church spires, wooded ghylls and pasture fields.

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

- 7) The role of the landscape, particularly the Commons, in providing a setting to the town of Royal Tunbridge Wells. The landscape contributes a distinctive identity to the town – historically, visually and providing balance between developed and undeveloped areas and an unequivocal boundary between town and countryside right to the town centre. The landscape forms a backdrop to many views from within the built-up areas of the town – including from the historic core at The Pantiles which is set in one of the lowest parts of the valley. The area around Haysden also provides an important strategic gap between Royal Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge. Despite its proximity to the towns, this area retains a pleasant, rural, farmed character.
- 8) The quiet and rural character of the area, including dark skies over much of the western part of the area - despite its proximity to Royal Tunbridge Wells – which allows access for the local community to ‘take a breather’ and experience woodland and nature along the many local footpaths, bridleways and toll rides. The rural character also contributes to the separate identity of the villages with their landmark church spires and towers, historic buildings and vernacular materials, village greens and are connected by rural lanes.
- 9) The role of the landscape for recreation for local communities, providing a strong landscape setting for activities such as walking, cycling and horse riding where experience of the landscape is important.
- 10) Ornamental parklands and gardens, which provide a sense of history and attractive landscapes.
- 11) Large areas of unimproved and improved grassland and pastoral fields.

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) Occasional views of modern development with less vernacular character on the edge of Royal Tunbridge Wells which sit above the wooded canopy – e.g. at Bidborough.
- 2) Air traffic noise reduces the sense of tranquillity in some areas.
- 3) 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) Maintain the distinctive character of the individual settlements including the clustered ridgetop villages and informal common-edge settlements.
- 2) The excellent rural-urban interface along the western edge of Royal Tunbridge Wells town centre, with open common land and woodland infiltrating the heart of the town, should be retained and enhanced.
- 3) Maintain the comparative tranquillity and seclusion of the intervening valleys. Development in these narrow valleys and ghylls can have a significant impact on their local character.
- 4) Ensure conversions and redevelopment of historic buildings maintains rural character – e.g. boundary treatments.
- 5) Promote woodland management through the development process or where grants are available, including the removal of non-native invasive species. New woodland planting can help integrate development into the landscape, but future maintenance requirements must be considered.
- 6) Protect and manage the sandstone rock outcrops against erosion.
- 7) Maintain and enhance the experience at Bidborough Ridge – hedgerow management would enable views from the scarp to the north. Improve the physical and perceptual qualities of recreational routes such as the Tunbridge Wells Circular Walk through seating, interpretation and way marking. Where possible seek to reduce speeds on rural roads at key crossing points.
- 8) Support existing management plans and any updates to improve accessibility on the Commons whilst managing impacts from usage and protecting and enhancing heritage and biodiversity interests.