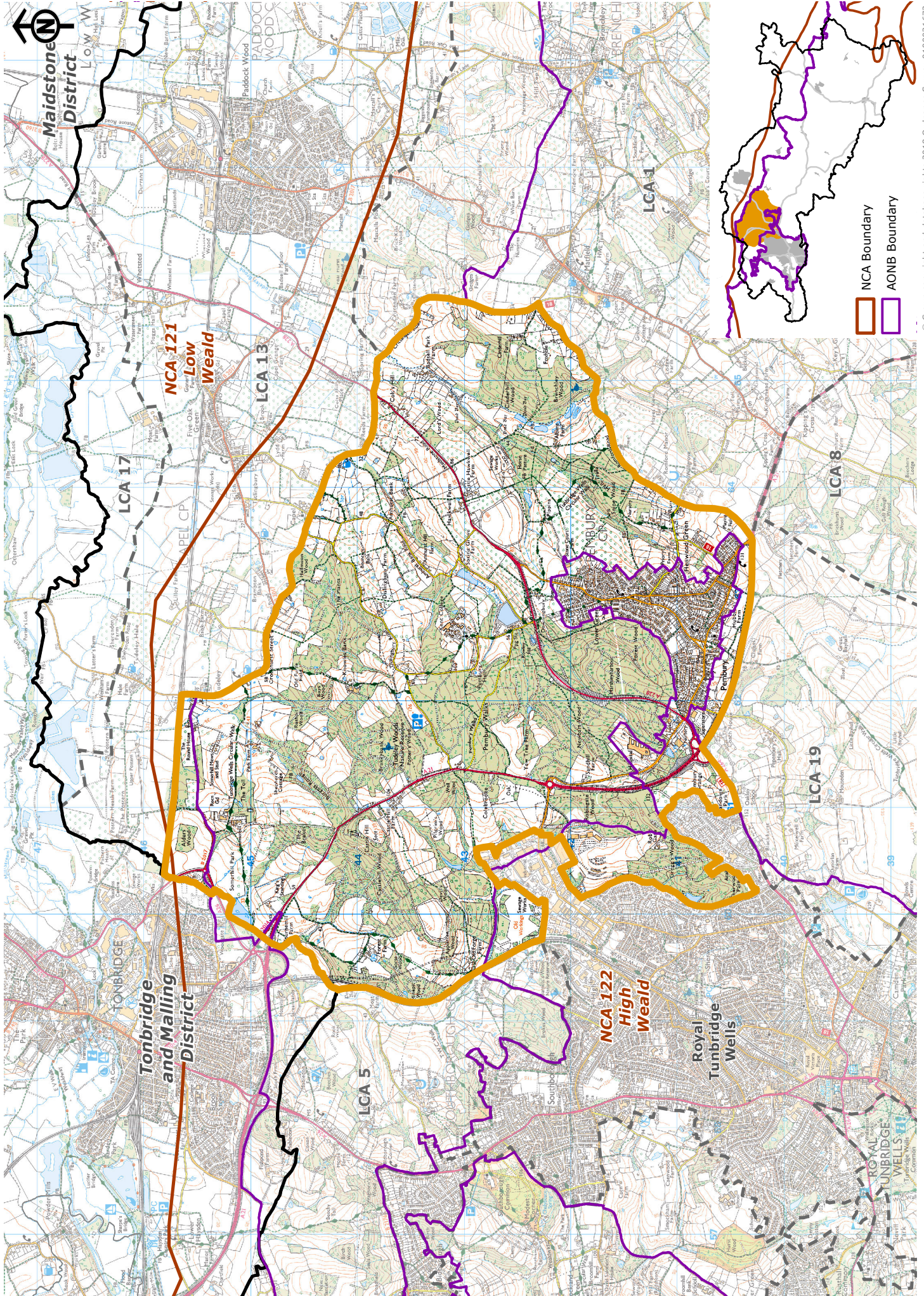


LCA 14 - Pembury/Capel Forested Plateau



SUMMARY

A contained area comprising large-scale forest cover with a large proportion of ancient woodland. The wooded mosaic surrounds an extensive area of lowland heathland, which has been recreated from plantation and arable farmland.



Key Characteristics

- 1) **Sandstone forming a high plateau rising to rounded hill tops in the centre of the forest, cut by long valleys of streams flowing northwards to the Medway, creating the locally characteristic topography of deep valleys and ghylls.**

The sandstone forms undulating slopes towards Southborough, around Amhurst Bank and the land immediately surrounding Pembury village. Castle Hill, at 132m AOD, with its prominent mast, is an example of a rounded hill top in the centre of the forest.

- 2) **Extensive woodland and forest cover dominates and tends to conceal local topographic variations and limits views both within the area and beyond.**

The character area is defined by its land cover comprising an extensive wooded mosaic, including extensive areas of ancient and semi-natural woodland and ancient replanted woodland as at Snipe Wood, Brakey Bank Wood, The Plants, Marshley Harbour Wood, Brenchley Wood and Cinderhill Wood. There are huge swathes of managed sweet chestnut coppice plantation, derelict mixed coppice and a large area of coniferous pine and larch forest.

The extensive forest cover tends to disguise local topographic variations. The nature of the land cover with its large-scale blocks of woodland means that the area is very contained, lacking the extensive views out across successive ridges that are common in many other parts of the High Weald. However, there are occasional 'surprise' views from clearings in the woodland, which, due to their relative elevation are long-reaching and offer a sense of vastness across wooded ridges and slopes, such as views northwards to the Greensand Ridge past Tonbridge.

- 3) **Wooded slopes form a backdrop to views from the surrounding areas including from Royal Tunbridge Wells.**

The wooded hills and slopes of the character area form a dark, dense wooded backdrop in many views, including views from the north such as the approach to Tunbridge Wells along the A21 and the wooded backdrop it provides to views from within the north-eastern part of Royal Tunbridge Wells and Southborough. Recent upgrading of the A21 to dual carriageway has opened up the highway to new views and although mitigation planting has been carried out it will be some time before the full effects will be appreciated.

- 4) **Within the woodland, grassland pastures bounded by thick shaws and sweeps of parkland provide an important contrast.**

The wooded areas are interspersed by open areas of traditional grazing pasture, surrounded by thick shaws which provide a welcome contrast with the dense tree cover. This results in a rich landscape pattern with historic origins – much of the landscape retains a historic field pattern of medieval assarts cut out of the surrounding woodland, of medium to large fields with wavy and irregular boundaries.

Although much of the grassland which permeates the woodlands has been improved, small pockets of permanent or semi-improved acidic pasture remain on some slopes such as the Alder stream valley, Amhurst Bank and at Badsell Farm. Swathes of sheep grazed acidic pastures, studded with mature parkland trees, are also a distinctive landscape feature at Somerhill Park, Pembury Hall and Home Farm.

Further diversity is provided by the gentle sweeps of parkland, in the small valley at Pembury Hall at the heart of the forest area and in the north of the area at Somerhill Park, where there is also quite an extensive area of wildflower grassland. Other areas of wildflower grassland at Pembury Walks and in the area of orchard to the east of Pembury village, add visual interest and natural character.

Along the clay valley north of Pembury, and along the ridge to the north-east of Pembury, there is a belt of orchards and fruit farms. Hops, which were formerly an important component of the land cover in this area, are now scarce.

5) Areas of relict heathland on the light soils of the sandstone ridges with two extensive areas of heathland restoration at Pembury Heath and Brenchley/Cinderhill Wood.

Throughout the area, the high sandstone ridges, with their light sandy soils, were formerly covered by heathland, in comparison with the heavily wooded clay valleys. There are areas of restored heathland at the Tudeley Woods RSPB Reserve – in Newbars Wood and Marshley Harbour Wood, and at Cinderhill Wood and at Horse Pasture. These heathlands form an attractive landscape and rich natural resource to which rare heathland plants and animals are returning. The whole of the Pembury area represents a biodiversity resource of very great potential with its mix of semi-natural woodland and lowland heathland.

6) A relative sense of remoteness despite its proximity to Royal Tunbridge Wells, Tonbridge and two main roads slicing through the area. Well served with recreational routes allowing good access on foot.

The large-scale forest cover and visual enclosure by landform, combined with little sense of modern intrusions in the heart of the area (such as main roads) provides a remote 'secretive' quality, despite the two main roads through the area and its proximity to the towns of Royal Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge.

The scale of the landscape, with its extensive woodland cover, allows it to absorb considerable numbers of people for recreation (walking or cycling) without detracting from its sense of peacefulness. The many leisure opportunities include the Pembury Walks, part of the Tunbridge Wells Circular Walk (which joins with the High Weald Landscape Trail in the east of the area), footpath routes around Nature Reserves such as Tudeley Woods and Barnett's Wood.

7) A self-contained landscape with a 'remote' secretive character with comparatively little settlement apart from Pembury village.

The area is distinctive for the relative absence of settlement and despite the proximity of Royal Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge there are surprisingly few houses (although some houses are located along the eastern boundary). This may in part be due to its role in medieval times as part of the Lowy of Tonbridge. The only significant settlement is the village of Pembury. Settlement is particularly sparse in the densely forested area to the west of the Maidstone Road (A228), which has an 'empty' almost remote feel. Much of the land in this area remains part of large estates (Hadlow and Bayham) and is largely unsettled, although several vernacular estate cottages survive.

In addition, the area supports a number of institutions, including Pembury Hospital and Kent College and the Somerhill schools. Despite being relatively large scale buildings they generally integrate well into the landscape as a result of sensitive siting and generously proportioned landscaping and planting surrounding them, with the tree canopy generally remaining the prominent visual element. The principal building of note is the reddish coloured sandstone Jacobean mansion at Somerhill Park on the northern edge of the character area.

8) Occasional rural lanes, vernacular buildings and small scale irregular fields provide an intricate pattern and human scale as well as a sense of history.

A few small rural lanes cross through the area, generally following a north-east/ south-west orientation along the ridges. Many roads, including the A21 and Maidstone Road, follow the line of ancient routeways. Other rural lanes are sunken and winding, lined by wooded banks or grass verges and provide a sense of enclosure and seclusion.

A relatively strong survival of isolated, dispersed historic farmsteads dating from the medieval period to the late 19th century provides a rich historic character. Vernacular buildings include tile hung and weatherboarded farmhouses, as well as formal stone buildings such as the Church of St Peter and vernacular estate cottages. Vernacular details include red and orange brick on building facades and low boundary walls, and hipped roofs. A small number of oasts remain as a testimony to the importance of 19th century hop farming in the area.

Pembury Village: This is a ridgetop settlement, although the still dense surrounding forest cover means that it is not a visually dominant feature in the landscape. The self-contained character of the village is accentuated by physical severance from its surroundings by the road bypasses, which run to the south and to the west. Pembury, nevertheless, retains its character as a ‘forest village’ with tree cover extending up to the settlement edge.

It has an individual character and sense of separateness from Royal Tunbridge Wells. Distinctive features of Pembury village include its ‘forest’ setting and wealth of tree cover, including both specimen evergreen and ancient forest trees. The village green serves as the main focal point of the village, overlooked by a pub (a former coaching inn) and detached houses of formal/ grand character which provide aesthetic interest. The village retains a sense of time depth, particularly in features such as the ancient routeways, church and some listed buildings.

Evidence of Past Use and Cultural Evolution

- 1) The densely forested area around Pembury formed one of the heartlands of the medieval iron industry.
- 2) Many remains of iron working (bloomeries), including charcoal hearths and furnace ponds, can be found within the woods.
- 3) The more open ridges provide important strategic sites and communication routes including ironways that connected into the industrial centres.
- 4) The earthwork ramparts visible on the high ridge of Castle Hill mark the site of an Iron Age contour hill fort, which is a Scheduled Monument. The site may be linked to an early pre-Roman iron industry.
- 5) Ancient routeways serve as a reminder to past routes used as old droveways. Some ancient routeways have been developed into major roads (e.g. the A21 and A228 Maidstone Road) but others have not (for example part of the Tunbridge Wells Circular Walk and the road that crosses through Somerhill Park). Routes converge at Pembury Conservation Area.
- 6) Somerhill Park (Grade II listed) is an early 19th century formal, terraced garden probably laid out by William Sawrey Gilpin and further developed in the later 19th century, set within a late 18th to early 19th century park. The Grade I listed Jacobean mansion, Somerhill is now home to The Schools at Somerhill. JMW Turner painted a view of the west front in 1810 which is now housed in the National Gallery of Scotland. Historically, Somerhill was a hunting chase in the 13th century which formed part of the demesne land of the Clares as part of Tonbridge.
- 7) The main road between Pembury and the area that became Royal Tunbridge Wells was historically a gated entrance into the South Frith estate known as ‘Wood gate’ and may have been one of the medieval droveways into the wooded pastures to the west and south of Royal Tunbridge Wells. Greggs Wood is a remnant of assart woodland of this former forested chase.

Semi-Natural Landscape and Priority Habitats

- 1) The semi-natural woodlands are an extremely important biodiversity resource with large areas designated as a LWS. There are particularly rich and diverse areas on ghylls and flushes at the base of the sands, with sessile oaks, ash and hazel.
- 2) There is an extensive area of woodland around the Knights Wood development which is being brought into positive management with public access, after years of neglect.
- 3) Tudeley Woods RSPB Reserve contains recently restored heathland and habitat improvements including coppiced woodland which has opened up the woodland floor and

created habitats for woodland flowers and butterflies. There are more than 1,000 species of fungi in the woods as well as orchids, bluebells and primroses.

- 4) Cinderhill heathlands are managed and protected. The combination of woodland and heaths make this an important area for reptiles and birds with all four species of common reptile being found in woodland close to Pembury village.
- 5) Loud birdsong and the extensive spring carpet of woodland wildflowers are a testament to the success of active management to restore the working coppice woodland habitat.
- 6) Small remnant pockets of permanent or semi-improved acid grassland pasture remain on steeper slopes such as the Alder stream valley and Amhurst Bank. Swathes of sheep grazed acidic pastures, studded with mature parkland trees, are also a distinctive landscape feature at Somerhill Park, Pembury Hall and Home Farm.

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 majority of the area lies within the High Weald AONB, except for a small area north of the B2017 in the north of the area, areas adjacent to the north-eastern part of Royal Tunbridge Wells, Pembury village and the area between Pembury and Royal Tunbridge Wells.

The following key qualities related to the AONB are particularly valued in this character area:

- 1) Historic farmsteads, which are dispersed across the character area, provide local distinctiveness, historic interest from their local materials and distinctive steep, clay tile and hipped roofs.
- 2) Ancient routeways, valued for their history and sense of place, particularly where they are narrow, deeply sunken and edged with trees, hedges and boundary banks.
- 3) Ancient woodland, ghylls and shaws. Woodland managed as coppice is valued for its sense of local distinctiveness in its cultural links to historic management in the past. Woodland is also of particular value where it is publicly accessible – for recreation for local communities – including the population of nearby Royal Tunbridge Wells, and for biodiversity.
- 4) The small, irregularly shaped historic fields, bounded by hedgerows and small woodlands, valued for the human-scale pattern they create in contrast with the larger scale woodlands, and the sense of history they hold with past farming activities.
- 5) Heathland, valued for its relative rarity in the national context, as well as the rare species it supports, its value as a reminder of the past state of the landscape and for its scenic qualities.

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

- 6) A strong natural character which is readily and extensively accessible on foot, including Council owned woodland (Marshley Harbour Wood), and land owned by public bodies such as the RSPB and woodlands around the Knights Park development.
- 7) The woodlands, wooded ghylls and mosaic of pasture, heathland, wildflower meadows provide a rich perceptual experience for the local population to experience wildlife from footpaths and recreational routes.

- 8) The sense of relative remoteness and a 'secret' quality provided by the enclosure of woodland and ridges, with occasional glimpsed views from high points. The relative lack of modern intrusions such as main roads and views of modern development, particularly in the core of the character area, provides a valued sense of 'escape'.
- 9) The sense of history provided by features including estates, parklands, historic farmsteads, the historic medieval landscape pattern of assarts and fields, wooded ghylls, ancient woodland and rural lanes.

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, including the A21 – especially the new flyover at Longfield Road.

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

- 2) Vulnerability to visual effects of the development beyond the AONB boundary, including the industrial estates and warehouse developments on the north east edge of the town of Royal Tunbridge Wells and in the area between Pembury and Royal Tunbridge Wells.

Opportunities for woodland planting around Royal Tunbridge Wells should be considered to help integrate this urban edge into the forested landscape and provide a measure of screening from the AONB. The former tip site represents an important opportunity for woodland planting. Species mixes and design should reflect the existing woodland character of the area.

- 3) Severance of Pembury village from its forest setting by the A21 and vulnerability of severed land to development.

Seek further opportunities to re-integrate Pembury village visually into its forest setting, particularly as part of the landscaping of infrastructure and other development proposals. The existing Pembury Walks, providing pedestrian access out from the village, are a good example. The retention and management of areas of woodland and pasture severed by the bypass is a priority.

- 4) The communications masts at Castle Hill introduce a sense of modern intrusion in the landscape and are widely visible.

Proposals for tall structures should be carefully considered in terms of potential landscape and visual impacts.

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) Ensure development proposals will not impact on the 'remote', 'secretive' and 'empty' forested and heathland character of this area.
- 2) Conserve the forested character of Pembury village and its setting. In this respect the areas of forest that lie within the A21 such as Forest Wood and Marshley Harbour Wood are particularly important to the character and setting of the village.
- 3) Conserve the 'village' character of Pembury, ensuring that new development has character, and appropriately designed landscaping to ensure it respects its surrounding context. New development should have a strong relationship to Pembury rather than looking 'outwards' (i.e. potential sprawl). Pembury village has potential for enhancement in relation to the sense of place at the high street, and enforcement of its focal centre, such as increasing vibrancy of local services and public realm.
- 4) The extensive industrial estates and associated development on the north east edge of Royal Tunbridge Wells significantly impinges on the rural character but benefits from some containment by woodland and topography. Any new development should not exacerbate this effect and will need a firm boundary of robust tree and woodland planting.