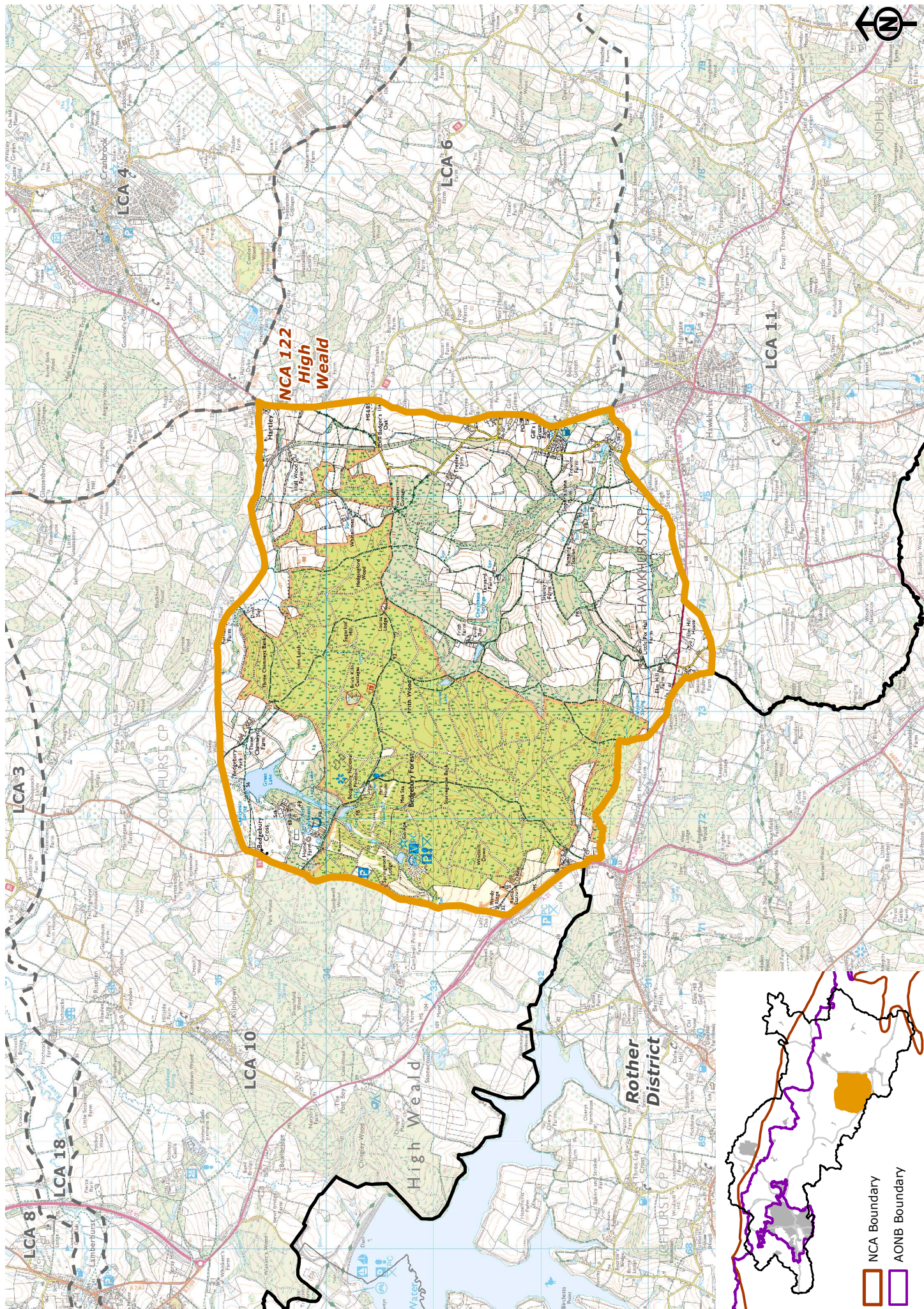


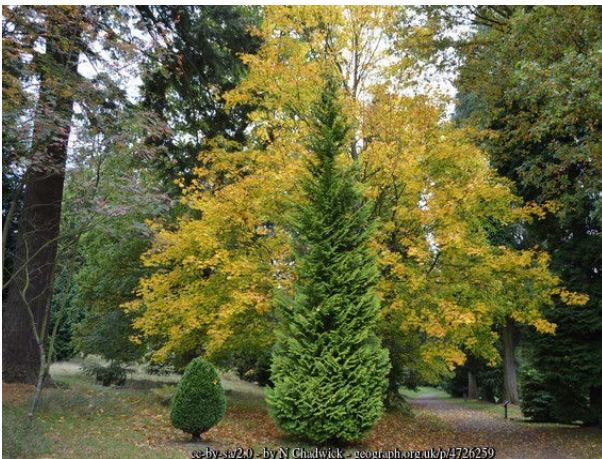
LCA 15 - Bedgebury Forested Plateau





## SUMMARY

**An upland plateau dominated by extensive coniferous forest blanketing the ridgelines and slopes, surrounded by a belt of arable and pasture farmland. The relative inaccessibility of the area and absence of rural lanes and settlement on any significant scale creates a large-scale landscape with a remote character.**



## Key Characteristics

### 1) **High plateau landscape of broad rolling domed ridges, predominantly on Tunbridge Wells Sandstone.**

The elevated topography, of up to 140m, gives occasional distant views (when not obscured by woodland) out to the surrounding Weald. The plateau consists of large-scale rolling hills that form broad, domed ridges stretching east to west and north to south through the area. These hills shelve down gently northwards towards two minor tributaries of the River Teise and southwards towards the Hexden Channel (a tributary of the River Rother) to an elevation of below 20m. This produces a more incised and intricate landform at the foot-slopes to the ridge.

### 2) **Large-scale forest patchwork, mainly coniferous plantation with localised broad-leaved plantation woodland, smothering the ridgetops and extending down the sides of valleys.**

The Tunbridge Wells Sandstone produces poor acidic soils which, in combination with the elevated topography, make farming problematic and the agricultural value of the land is low.

Consequently, Bedgebury has largely remained under continuous woodland cover until the present day, albeit that much has been reforested with coniferous plantation, with stands of various ages, forming the large ancient replanted woodland of Bedgebury Forest.

The plantings of the Pinetum are a distinctive feature of national importance and there are areas of chestnut coppice woodland and pockets of birch and oak which provide tonal contrast and variety. The forest is the largest area of woodland within the Borough and covers nearly five square kilometres of the high plateau landscape; it is highly visible and identifiable on the ridge and crest lines for a considerable distance and the large radio mast at Windy Ridge is a significant landmark.

Bedgebury Forest is under the ownership and control of the Forestry Commission, with a uniformity of management which has resulted in a relatively homogenous local landscape character. At the periphery some areas of plateau are not planted and here the woodland extends intermittently down the mid-slopes, creating a patchwork of forest interspersed with large-scale clearings.

### 3) **Lower slopes and valleys under arable cultivation with large fields intersected by mixed coniferous/deciduous ghyll woodlands, which merge with the upland forest.**

In contrast with the plateau, the lower slopes surrounding the area of the edge of the forest are overlain by drift deposits and are in agricultural, predominantly arable, but also pastoral use. Some of the fields have undergone modern field amalgamation, however, many of the fields surrounding the replanted woodland and ancient ghyll woodland retain their historic character as small irregular assart fields historically cut out from the surrounding woodland, and retaining wooded hedge and shaw boundaries adjoining thick ghyll woodlands in the deep intersecting valleys.

The valley woodlands visually merge with the plateau forest and create a rich, broad patchwork of farmland and forest on the lower slopes. In the areas surrounding the forested plateau the settled and cultivated farmland reduces the sense of isolation, but the forested character remains dominant. There are few hedgerows in the area, to a great extent because of the high proportion of woodland cover. On the ridges, where boundaries are present, they include sparse hawthorn hedgerows or, more frequently, rusting and damaged estate railing or post and wire fencing. Hedgerows are more intact in the valleys, although many have been removed in combination with the arable agriculture. This further increases the scale and reduces the intimacy of the landscape.

### 4) **General absence of visible settlement and buildings creates a sense of relative remoteness.**

Settlement and built infrastructure are characteristically absent or hidden on the forested plateau except Windy Ridge radio transmission tower, Bedgebury Park and the industrial estate at Gills Green. The radio tower located on Windy Ridge can be seen for many miles from the surrounding area and must therefore be considered a major landmark of the Borough. Its appearance presents a stark image and is suggestive of bleak upland moors, therefore increasing the perception of the area as large-scale and remote. To some extent, it intrudes upon the 'picturesque' quality of the Wealden landscape.

The few domestic buildings that are present are the dispersed and isolated farm buildings that occur on the slopes or valley floors of the tributaries. These include some larger-scale farm buildings in association with the arable agriculture, although these are not especially prominent. A linear settlement of foresters' cottages on the boundary of the character area along the road near Flimwell and development associated with Gills Green are the only locations that have a more settled domestic character.

Some isolated historic farmsteads are dispersed across the south-east of the area, closely associated with the routes of ancient droveways. Predominantly 19<sup>th</sup> century, some date from the medieval period and may have originated from the former 'dens' used for transhumance.

- 5) **Low vehicle accessibility but relatively well served with bridleways and footpaths. The absence of roads and lanes traversing the area present the illusion of a vast elusive area that can only be admired from afar.**

A network of ancient routeways covers the south eastern part of the area, most of which radiate north-south from the east-west ridgetop trackway. These are likely to have once been ironways and/or medieval droves, used for transhumance - the seasonal movement of people and animals for summer and winter feeding, specifically for pannage (the practice of feeding pigs on acorns and fallen nuts in a forest) but may also be prehistoric tracks. The ancient routeways are now bridleways and footpaths through the forest and across valleys.

- 6) **Localised pockets of ornamental parkland character.**

Bedgebury Park is a Grade II\* listed mansion dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The property contains formal gardens with terraced lawns and parkland with a chain of lakes, dating from the 1830s.

- 7) **A generally large-scale, remote, exposed and isolated character, particularly along the ridges.**

All views within the area are terminated by distant wooded ridgelines and it is a large-scale landscape. The low number and visibility of buildings in combination with the relative inaccessibility of the forest to vehicles, creates the impression of a remote landscape of considerable dramatic beauty. The relative lack of modern intrusions such as main roads and views of modern development, particularly in the core of the character area (where there are very dark skies), provides a valued sense of 'escape'.

- 8) **Recreation.**

Bedgebury National Pinetum and Forest is the main visitor attraction and contains the National Pinetum, with nearly 100 hectares of botanical gardens consisting of mainly coniferous species, established in 1924 by the Forestry Commission and the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew. The Pinetum is listed as Grade II on the Historic England Register of Historic Parks and Gardens and is recognised as one of the most complete collections of conifers on one site anywhere in the world and plays an important role in international work for conifer conservation.

Bedgebury Forest is a regional attraction for off road cycling and offers a wide range of recreational pursuits including walking, running horse-riding, forest-related education and a 'Go-Ape' facility supported by a visitors centre with coffee shop and education centre.

#### **Evidence of Past Use and Cultural Evolution**

- 1) The poor quality of the soils and relative inaccessibility nature of the area have limited



significant development or settlement, and throughout history much of the area has remained wooded.

- 2) The iron industry was important during Tudor times. Bedgebury Furnace and Pond, a Scheduled Monument, marks the site of an iron furnace, recorded in 1574 and rebuilt in 1664.
- 3) The Manor of Bedgebury, owned by John de Bedgebury and his descendants in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries was the centre of the local iron industry in the area. It had a famous foundry which is said to have cast guns for the fleet that fought the Spanish Armada in 1588. It also had extensive parklands and woodlands, which were bought by the Forestry Commission in 1929.
- 4) Historic ironways remain substantially unchanged as rural lanes.
- 5) The old Hawkhurst Branch Railway Line cuts through the area between Hartley and Gill's Green where the line terminated at Gills Green/ Hawkhurst Station. 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. The line remains conspicuous in the landscape, being demarked by hedgerows, boundaries and earthworks. The former Cranbrook station was located in Hartley in the far north-eastern corner of the character area, which survives today although it has since been converted to a residential dwelling. Parts of the platform still survive as do some railway workers cottages. The line runs south and passes through Badger Oak Tunnel, which retains its original brickwork, before reaching Gills Green/ Hawkhurst Station which has since been demolished. The area has become a modern industrial estate, although an engine shed and railway workers cottages survive.

### **Semi-Natural Landscape and Priority Habitats**

- 1) Valuable woodland, particularly the large areas of ancient and replanted ancient woodland, and important acidic wetland habitats support a large diversity of flora, insects, birds and mammals.
- 2) Many of the tributaries to the River Teise and Hexden Channel have been dammed and there are several lakes, the largest of which, Great Lake, is contained and screened by an arc of high ridges. Water is therefore not an important visible component of the landscape although it introduces a habitat of considerable ecological interest. Louisa Lake is a notable acid lake with various aquatic plants and several species of dragonfly.
- 3) Bedgebury Forest is a designated LWS. Throughout the whole forest the wide rides, with their remnant heath vegetation, are valuable habitats with species including ling, bell heather, heath bedstraw, wavy hair grass, helleborine and coral necklace (a very rare plant). The pinetum and forestry plots are important for their fungal flora and are probably one of the richest sites in South East England for agaric species. The blanket plantation pine conceals ghyll woodlands hidden in the valleys and remnant areas of ancient oak woodland over mixed coppice, parts of which may be a continuation of the Saxon Andredsweald.
- 4) Ghyll woodlands in the area are generally a mix of both coniferous and broad-leaved species, which differentiates them from other ghyll woods in the Borough. Some of these woodlands support a rich species diversity including pedunculate oak, hornbeam, ash, holly and elder with a ground flora including fern, primrose, wild daffodil, bluebell and anemone.



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

- 1) 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.
- 2) 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.
- 3) 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:

- 4) A strong natural character which is readily and extensively accessible on foot. The woodlands, wooded ghylls and mosaic of pasture, heathland, wildflower meadows for example, provide a rich perceptual experience for the local population to experience wildlife from footpaths and recreational routes.
- 5) 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 (where there are very dark skies), provides a valued sense of 'escape'.
- 6) The sense of history provided by features including estates, parklands, historic farmsteads, the historic landscape pattern of assarts and fields, wooded ghylls, ancient woodland and rural lanes.
- 7) The contribution the area makes to the local 'chain' of recreation spaces with the surrounding landscape, including Bewl Water, Scotney Castle etc.

## 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.*
- 2) The visual impact of large swathes of woodland of differing species or age profiles can be



very great, especially on vulnerable ridges where abrupt changes cutting across the grain of the landscape can form regular blocks on the horizon.

*Aim to ensure that long-term forestry management continues to address visual and ecological issues and opportunities. Where felling or replanting occur, the topography and local landscape grain should be respected and abrupt changes between differing areas of woodland avoided.*

## 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 sense of remoteness/isolation of Bedgebury. There are currently few settled areas, and existing buildings are generally low-key and dispersed. Further development would be to the detriment of the special perceptual qualities of the area, including its sense of comparative remoteness and isolation, which are rare qualities in the Borough and in Kent generally.
- 2) Conserve and enhance the remote and elusive character of the extensive forested upland plateau and its surrounding framework of wooded farmland, with recognition of the important role that the high, coniferous ridges play in presenting a dramatic image visible and identifiable over a wide area.
- 3) The planting of screening tree cover may help to integrate any minor development that may be permitted within its landscape context.
- 4) Development should relate to the characteristic dispersed settlement pattern in the lower valleys, and should generally avoid locations on the ridge tops as it is likely to be visible over long distances. New development proposals on elevated locations should consider impacts on longer distant views and visual character.
- 5) Be aware of the long-term sequence of changing views and open areas created by the cycle of forestry felling and replanting.
- 6) Any enhancements to designed parklands should promote restoration and management through the development process, including conservation of characteristic estate railings.