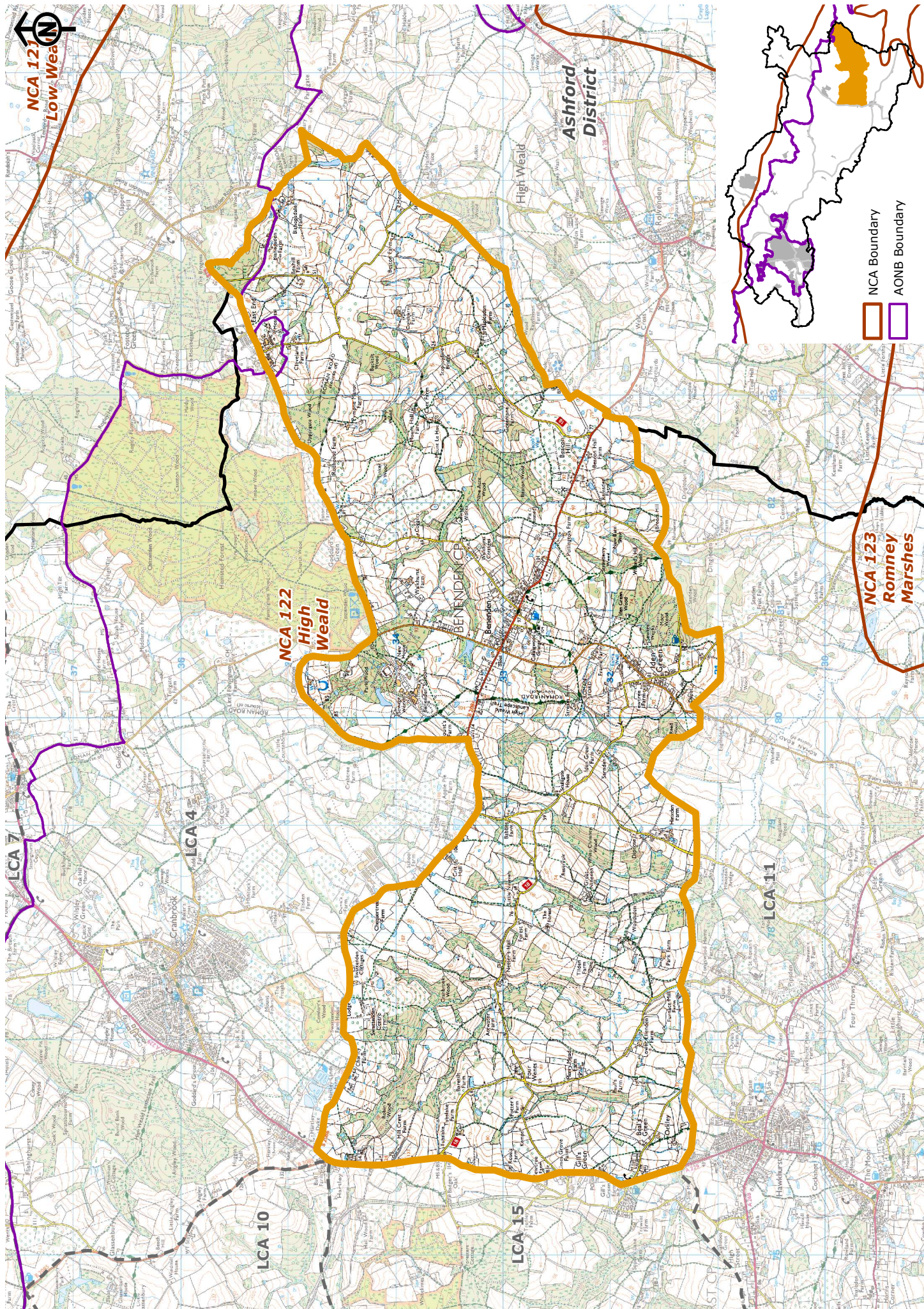


LCA 6 - Benenden Wooded Farmland



SUMMARY

A peaceful rural landscape of rolling hills with scattered farmsteads and rural dwellings, often concealed by woodlands and the topography, but representing a rich built heritage. The interconnected wooded framework, created by the ecologically-valuable incised ghylls and field boundary shaws, is one of the defining features of the area. The landscape also has an 'ornamental' overlay created by the formal parklands, which can be glimpsed from the public roads.



Key Characteristics

- 1) **Action of the Benenden Fault that has resulted in a variation between Tunbridge Wells Sand and Wadhurst Clay.**

The landform is largely the result of the Benenden Fault, which crosses the landscape in a roughly north west to south east direction. Along the fault a thin band of the Ashdown Beds is revealed while Wadhurst Clay dominates the area to the north and north east of the fault and Tunbridge Wells Sand to the south.

- 2) **An elevated plateau of rolling hills incised by narrow ghyll valleys which drop down to the larger deep valley landscape of the Hexden Channel.**

The total variation in elevation varies considerably from over 120m AOD to below 40m AOD. South of the Benenden Fault, the landscape is strongly incised by the numerous valleys that drain steeply down to the Hexden Channel, which is outside the Local Character Area. These narrow and enclosed valleys generally run in a north to south direction. To the north and north east of the fault, a further series of tributary valleys run in a west to east direction. The lasting impression for most of the area is an intricate, complex landscape of interlocking rolling hills incised by deep, narrow, wooded ghyll valleys.

- 3) **Strong sense of prospect and long distance views from the ridge tops with a more intimate, smaller-scale experience within the ghyll valleys.**

Within the area as a whole, there is a strong sense of elevation with open, long-range views north to Hemsted Forest from the roads that run along the ridge top. This contrasts with the more intimate, small-scale landscape occurring in the intersecting valleys. The sense of intimacy within a framework of elevation is one of the defining characteristics of the area and is perceived quite differently from the similar ghyll valleys occurring within other character areas of lower elevation, for example in the Hawkhurst area to the south.

There are frequent unspoilt views across the High Weald landscape such as views south from local high points including Benenden Church and Iden Green.

- 4) **Dominance of pasture landscape, with occasional isolated remnant areas of semi-improved grassland.**

Pasture farmland is the dominant land use within this wooded framework, with sheep grazing characteristic and horses also an increasingly familiar sight. A relatively large area of unimproved grassland is found near Bishopsden Farm in the north of the character area.

- 5) **The appearance of a peaceful, well managed, small-scale and intact agricultural landscape, although with a larger-scale, open, arable landscape dominant in some areas.**

Arable land occurs in small-scale, medium and large fields, with a particular concentration in the larger fields south of Benenden village and around Iden Green. Apple orchards are not a dominant part of the landscape but occur infrequently as, for example, to the north east of Benenden village and to the east of Iden Green.

The peaceful, rural character is accentuated by the extensively dark skies across most of the character area.

- 6) **Very variable field boundary hedgerows, ranging from thick woodland shaws to some which have disappeared almost entirely.**

Hedgerows (excluding the woodland shaw boundaries) are very bare in places. However, the mature trees, particularly oaks, that once formed part of the hedgerows remain as important features of the landscape and in some places create an almost parkland quality. Where hedgerows have been removed, wooden paddock-style fencing is common. In contrast, much of the area also has large, unmanaged hedgerows that have become overgrown and bushy.

- 7) **Attractive and ecologically-rich wooded framework created by the strong surviving intact network of ghyll and shaw woodlands particularly associated with the incised valleys.**

The heavy clays that are revealed along the deep narrow valleys, combined with the steep topography, have resulted in their exclusion from agriculture and they remain as long strips of thin ghyll woodlands connecting with the linear shaws and occasional woodland blocks on the more open plateau and valley sides. This wooded framework imparts a strong sense of pattern, orientation and sub-division within the landscape. The high density of woodland, including many remnant ancient woodlands, creates an area of considerable biodiversity interest and there are a greater number of designated ghyll and associated shaw woodlands here than anywhere else in the Borough (see Nature Conservation Interest below).

- 8) **Strong ornamental parkland quality associated with Benenden School and Hole Park.**

Parkland is characteristic of the area and occurs at Benenden School (formerly Hempstead Park) in the north and Hole Park to the east. The landscape of scattered, mature trees set within pasture is highly visible from the road and gives this part of the area an 'ornamental' overlay. The gardens and pleasure grounds of Benenden School are Grade II listed on the Historic England Register of Historic Parks and Gardens.

- 9) **A rich built heritage with numerous listed buildings and historic farmsteads dispersed throughout the countryside. Buildings are not generally prominent in the wider landscape, and are hidden by the hilly topography and woodland cover.**

The isolated rural dwellings include a large number of timber framed Yeoman's farmhouses dating to the 1500s. In addition, there are scattered red brick and white weatherboarded farmsteads and occasional oasts present as well as a prominent dilapidated windmill on the Rolvenden Road. There is a strong survival of medieval dispersed, isolated farmsteads throughout the character area but particularly in the south west of the area. The pattern of isolated farmsteads is related to their historic use as 'dens' – it is likely that many of the dens in this area were owned by manors outside the Weald. They were later settled as farmsteads and hamlets. There is a particular concentration of listed buildings around the village of Benenden.

The location of individual historic farmsteads and houses along ridgetops creates the impression of a settled landscape but does not diminish the rural quality. Mid to close range views of the sparsely-screened dwellings on the mid-slopes and valley floors are common. The main settlements of Benenden and Iden Green are located on the ridgetops but are not generally visible from the surrounding landscape due to their small size and screening provided by parkland trees, woodland and hedgerows.

Benenden: Benenden, originating as an "estate" village related to Hempstead Park, is the largest settlement of the character area. It is designated as a Conservation Area and is rich in brick and tile-hung dwellings. It has one of the largest village greens in Kent. The village is approximately linear, having grown up along an important ridgetop communications route, although development has subsequently expanded onto the adjoining roads. Many of the houses are medieval and there are numerous estate houses built in the nineteenth century.

Benenden School is housed in a large Elizabethan-style building with a more modern extension. Its large scale makes it a prominent feature of the landscape. The parkland joining the school, a Tudor landscape laid over earlier Roman and medieval settlements, is listed Grade II on the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens, and makes a significant contribution to the character of the area.

Benenden Hospital/ East End: A former scattered hamlet, East End became home to a sanatorium at the beginning of the 20th century which, over time has developed into a modest private hospital with associated amenities set within farmland. It has an unusual and unique character that is a combination of the village and medical facility.

Iden Green is a small ridgetop linear settlement straddling the lane connecting Benenden and Sandhurst. It is a Conservation Area with brick-built and weatherboarded buildings. The weatherboarding, unusually, includes green and cream in addition to the more common white.

10) Strong network of rural lanes.

The whole area is crossed by a network of rural lanes, which dip into the intersecting wooded valleys and cross the open pasture areas. These lanes, in combination with footpaths and rural tracks, form a dense network of ancient routeways crossing north-south across the area and occasionally east-west along ridgelines. Ancient routeways, a typical feature of the High Weald, were the former droveways 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’) within the area.

Lanes are frequently bounded by low hedgerows, allowing views out to the surrounding landscape. The lanes are fairly heavily trafficked and many are used as cut-through routes.

11) A relatively intact medieval landscape.

The landscape retains a relatively intact medieval character despite considerable boundary rationalisation and loss, with a strong survival of small, sinuous medieval assart fields bounded by wooded hedges, particularly in the west of the character area, medieval farmsteads and ancient woodland (such as Robin’s Wood, Cranbrook Wood, Moor Wood and Nine Acre Wood) and narrow wooded ghyll woodlands. Larger fields (for example in the east of the area around Colebarn Farm and Cott Farm, are likely to also be medieval in origin, typical of a co-axial field system. These fields are generally medium in size and have sinuous wooded hedge boundaries.

Evidence of Past Use and Cultural Evolution

- 1) Smelting of the iron ore deposits in the area is thought to have occurred from at least Roman times and possibly earlier, in the Iron Age.
- 2) The courses of two Roman roads cross through the area: the Rochester-Maidstone-Hastings road which crossed north-south through the grounds of Benenden School, and the Benenden-Canterbury road which ran east-west across the character area near to Bishopsden Farm.
- 3) The main road (B2086), on which Benenden is located, runs across the ridge top and has variously functioned as both a drove road and an iron way.
- 4) Near Iden Green, this is demonstrated by the paved ford crossing the line of the Roman Road, which is designated as a Scheduled Monument and an ancient stone culvert.
- 5) Hole Park historic park and garden lies partly within the borough in the south west of the character area. This contains an 18th century house set within extensive parkland as well as formal gardens with wooded valley and walks laid out from the early 20th century. The Grange comprises another early 20th century gardens, set around a 19th century house.
- 6) The Grade II listed Benenden School, formerly Hemsted House originates from 1216 but is famous for its association with Kitty Fisher, a courtesan painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds and the one of the world’s first ‘celebrities’ and the subject of the nursery rhyme *“Lucy Locket lost her pocket,/ Kitty Fisher found it;/ Not a penny was there in it/ Except the binding round it.”*

Semi-Natural Landscape and Priority Habitats

- 1) Robins Wood is a nationally important Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and is typical ancient ghyll woodland with hornbeam, ash and hazel coppice below oak and beech standards containing pen stocks for iron works. The high level of humidity in this deep valley supports a rich assemblage of ferns, mosses and liverworts.
- 2) Parsonage Wood is also a SSSI as well as a Nature Reserve, with damp stream banks that support many ferns and bryophytes, including rare species.
- 3) White Chimney Woods, Nine Acre Wood and the Benenden Woods are ancient ghyll woodland and are Local Wildlife Sites (LWS).
- 4) Moor Wood is ancient broad-leaved woodland and LWS that has mainly been converted to sweet chestnut coppice with a rich bluebell understorey. The area also contains small pockets of semi-improved pasture which are also of great importance.
- 5) Beston Farm (LWS) has important neutral rough pasture, which is species rich, including rare and indicative plants such as quaking grass.
- 6) There are also small remnant areas of wooded heath within the area.

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 (with the exception of a small area around East End in the north-east of the character area). The following key qualities related to the AONB are particularly valued:

- 1) The scenic rolling hills 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 historic farmsteads and hamlets and locally distinctive buildings which add important local character to the landscape and a sense of history.
- 3) Ancient routeways that form a clear network of rural lanes, footpaths and tracks, lined by hedgerows or woodland which add historic interest and local distinctiveness to the landscape.
- 4) Woodland, providing a strong landscape framework– particularly ancient woodlands, ghylls and shaws. This is of value for many reasons including historic, aesthetic, biodiversity and recreation interest.
- 5) The intact historic landscape pattern of small and irregular fields bounded by woodland, shaws and ghylls, closely related to the presence of historic farmsteads and the network of ancient routeways.

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

- 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 Benenden, laid out as an “estate” village, including its architectural interest and the large village green which provides a focal point and setting to the church and other grand buildings.
- 8) The formal parklands which include Benenden School and surrounding parkland and Hole Park, valued for their local distinctiveness and scenic quality.
- 9) The strong natural character indicated by the presence of a number of ecological designations.

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) New development under construction at the edge of the character area (the care home on Cranbrook Road) which departs in style from the local vernacular.

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 certain parts of the character area may play in the setting of the AONB. Protection of the valued features and qualities of the landscape should include appropriate planning to ensure any new development is appropriate in scale and character to the landscape context.

- 1) Maintain the essentially wooded and rural agricultural character of the area.
- 2) Ensure that the well-managed, small-scale agricultural character remains intact. Hedgerow loss and larger-scale arable farming becoming dominant in some areas results in the loss of ecological interest and aesthetic appeal which could potentially destroy the scale of the landscape.
- 3) Ensure that the existing pattern of settlement i.e. small-scale dispersed rural buildings which are not visually prominent and are hidden by the landform and woodland cover, is protected.