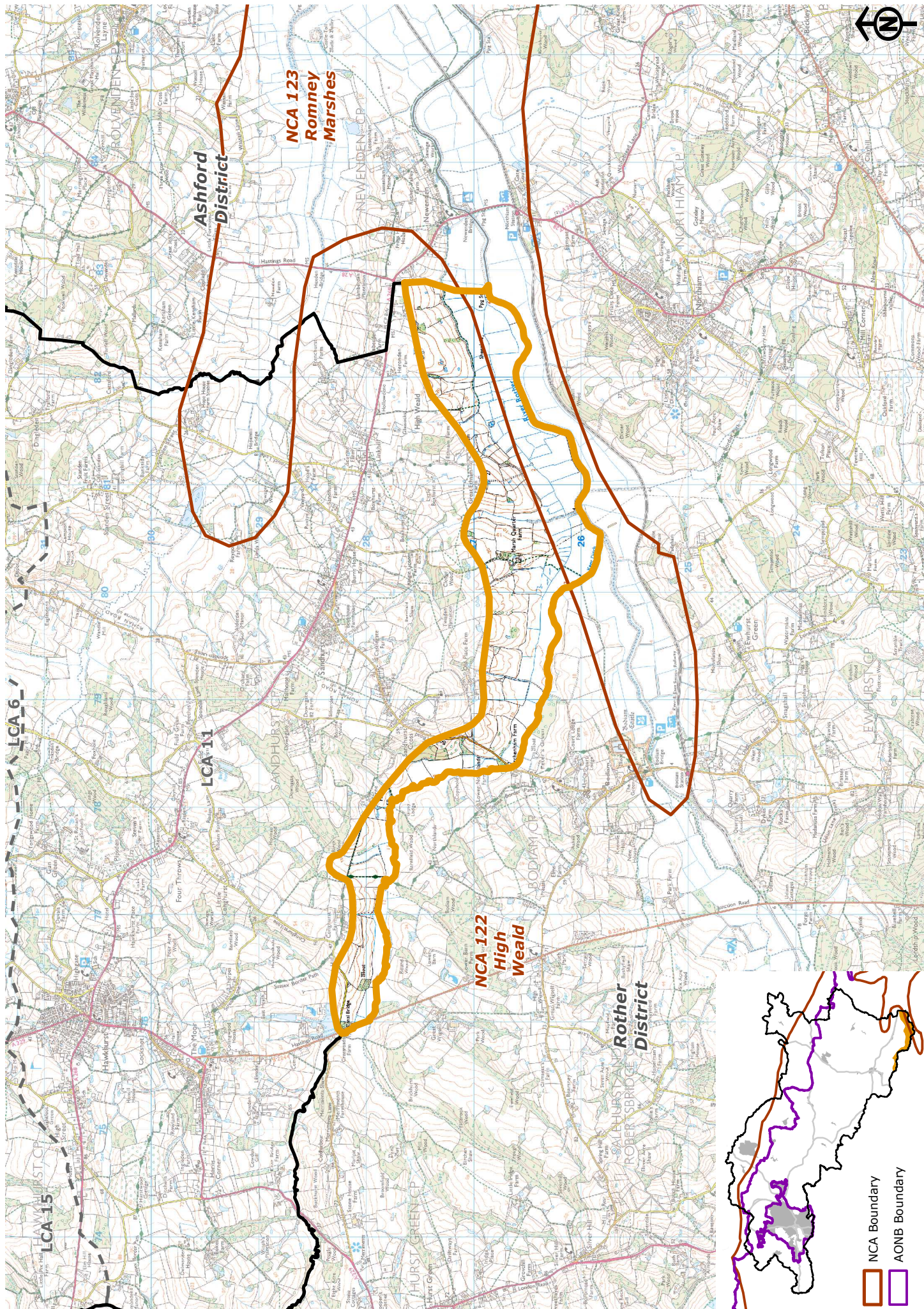


LCA 16 - Rother Valley





## SUMMARY

A wide, flat and open lowland river valley plain in the east and a more enclosed small scale tributary valley landscape in the west. Long-range views to the surrounding valley sides and distant horizons across large, predominantly arable, fields interspersed with pasture, occasional scattered trees and copses and crossed by a network of water and reed-filled drainage ditches. The area is notable for the absence of development, roads and settlement creating a remote, almost 'empty', character.



## Key Characteristics

- 1) **Wide river valley floodplain of the River Rother in the east of the area and a narrower, more enclosed valley of the Kent Ditch in the west of the character area.**

Within the Borough the River Rother flows in a wide lowland valley that cuts across the upland plateau of the High Weald, creating a topographically distinct landscape. The valley floor is almost exclusively overlain by alluvial drift deposits, the element largely responsible for the area's appearance and land use. The local character area also includes the valley of the Kent Ditch, which joins the valley of the River Rother in the western part of the area. Here the river valley is narrower, smaller in scale and more enclosed by sweeping valley sides.

The River Rother is a moderately wide river that meanders through the area and is the principal influence on local character. Much of this river was engineered and straightened in the 1960s and views of the water are therefore frequently obscured by the steep bunds that now flank the immediate river corridor. By comparison, the small Kent Ditch is more natural in character and marks the southern Borough and County boundary.

- 2) **Large regular arable fields drained by a network of channels and ditches.**

The valley is classified as Grade 3 agricultural land and drainage of the rich alluvial soils has enabled the majority of the valley to be used for arable farming. However the susceptibility of the valley to flood and the generally high water table has dissuaded some landowners from converting land to arable farmland. For this reason sheep grazing on improved and semi-improved pasture also occurs, particularly downstream, in the eastern part of the area. The differential distribution of pasture and arable land means that, in spring, the valley is a checkerboard of green pasture and yellow swathes of oil seed rape fields.

A dense network of ditches and channels, most of which originate from the 1940s, has been created to drain the wide floodplain of the River Rother and dissect the flat floodplain. This drainage has provided better quality soil; however, the valley is still subject to extensive flooding in winter when a muddy sheet of water covers the valley floor. This phenomenon provides seasonal variety and interest and creates an element of drama in the landscape. The shallow standing water body is also of potentially great ornithological interest.

The field size has increased, due to lack of hedgerows and particularly for land under arable cultivation, resulting in a stark, intensively farmed appearance in places.

- 3) **Sparse hedgerow network with sporadic hedgerow trees.**

All of the fields are regular, large-scale and tend to be surrounded by low, species-poor, heavily trimmed or defunct hedgerows with sporadic hedgerow oak trees and small areas of scrub, although some thick and unmanaged oak and hawthorn hedges also remain. It is evident that many hedges have been purposefully removed and the remaining hedgerows are vulnerable to loss through neglect.

Only the occasional gnarled willows or tall poplar trees, which may be discerned along the banks of the watercourses, create variety in this otherwise open, unwooded landscape. In general, the Rother is fairly bare of bankside vegetation, but the Kent Ditch has a much denser cover comprising predominantly crack willow, alder and ash with scrub. The network of drainage ditches are also flecked by patches of scrub and stunted willow trees.

- 4) **On the valleys slopes of the Kent Ditch some fields of pasture, vines and hops interspersed with larger, arable fields and clusters of trees.**

The undulating northern slopes of the Kent Ditch contain some smaller pasture fields grazed by sheep and divided by hedgerows and woodland, creating a more intricate and smaller scale landscape pattern. This is complemented by the wooded slopes on the southern bank of the river within Wealden district.

The river valley and rural lanes such as Bodiam Road are marked out in longer distance views by woodland and vegetation, creating features which wind through the landscape, with the trees along rural lanes winding up the valley slopes.

**5) Small remnant areas of unimproved and permanent pasture.**

These are important in providing pattern and diversity in this otherwise open, large-scale landscape.

The pasture land in the valley has largely been improved; nevertheless some isolated patches of semi-improved pasture remain and include a rich mix of grass and meadow plants including selfheal, birdsfoot trefoil, buttercup and centaury. At a detailed level these pastures provide an important contrast with the intensively grazed fields and sweep of arable land.

**6) Absence of buildings and few roads located on floodplain creating a general sense of emptiness and 'remoteness', with very dark skies.**

The valley appears unsettled and very few lanes traverse the area, which creates a feeling of isolation and very dark skies. The virtual absence of human settlement is fundamental to the 'remote' and empty character of the landscape. There are virtually no buildings or built elements located on the valley floor, largely due to the seasonal flood risk. Farmhouses, oasts and settlements can be discerned on the distant valley sides and on the horizons to the south east.

**7) Long-range views creating an open, large-scale character.**

The valley bottom is wide and flat permitting extremely long, distant views, contained and focussed by rolling valley sides, which provide a sense of enclosure and shelter. However, from the valley floor the landscape appears large-scale and open, even to the point of exposure. The wide open spaces and long views are a fundamental part of the character of this area.

Overall the valley is a pleasant and peaceful, even 'remote' place. It is visually accessible but physically inaccessible, except by foot, with only one lane entering the area (that from Sandhurst to Bodiam which crosses the Kent Ditch). A section of the Sussex Border Path crosses through the area enabling access on foot, in addition to a number of other footpaths and bridleways.

The wide open river levels, the intensive and large-scale agriculture and the virtual absence of human settlement combine to create an empty, almost desolate, feel on the valley floor. The line of pylons, which cut across the valley near Marshquarter Farm, detract locally from the rural ambience and reinforce this windswept, bleak character.

**Evidence of Past Use and Cultural Evolution**

- 1) There are few buildings or historic features of particular note within this part of the Rother Valley, which in part may be due the lower areas forming part of a river estuary in medieval times with settlement on the valley sides. Bodiam Castle is located nearby in East Sussex and is an important feature of the character area in its wider sense. The Rother valley is particularly important in maintaining the isolated, storybook setting of Bodiam Castle.
- 2) The section of Bodiam Road crossing through the centre of the area partly follows the course of a Roman Road between Rochester, Maidstone and Hastings.
- 3) A 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> farmhouse (Marsh Quarter Farm) is sited on the northern river bank. Surrounding the farmstead, and in some other parts of the area, are remnants of an historic field pattern of late medieval, 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century small fields with wavy boundaries with ponds. These ponds indicate the presence of 'marling' pits, a practice dating from the medieval period in order to produce marl to improve the soil.

### Semi-Natural Landscape and Priority Habitats

- 1) The effect of drainage, river engineering and agricultural intensification has restricted the value of the area for wildlife and there are no areas of designated nature conservation interest. Despite this, the drainage ditches and waterways do support a wide range of aquatic and marginal species plants and the area, as a whole, has great biodiversity potential under appropriate management.
- 2) Species found within Kent Ditch include water mint, hard rush, yellow flag, water plantain, frogbit, arrowhead and water milfoil.
- 3) The Rother is of relatively poor nature conservation interest, only supporting common species such as soft and hard rush, common reed and duckweed.
- 4) Reed-filled ditches which remain uncleared are an important feature creating local pattern and diversity in the landscape.
- 5) Some areas of coastal and floodplain grazing marsh (a BAP priority habitat) are present close to the River, north of Dyneshil Wood. These habitats include meadow with ditches which are especially rich in plants and invertebrates. These habitats are usually grazed and some are cut for hay or silage. They are particularly important for the number of breeding waders and wintering wildfowl they support.

### 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 elements of character related to the AONB are particularly valued in this character area:

- 1) The Rother and Kent Ditch river valleys contribute strongly to the character of the surrounding High Weald, as the wide lowland cuts across the upland plateau of the High Weald.
- 2) Long range views to the surrounding valley sides and distant horizons of the High Weald.
- 3) The importance of the Rother Valley in maintaining the isolated, storybook setting of Bodiam Castle (outside the Borough to the south).

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

- 4) The absence of development, roads and settlement, creating a remote character with very dark skies.
- 5) Recreational value of walking routes including the small section of the Sussex Border Path recreational route.
- 6) Trees and woodland which add visual and biodiversity interest to the valley slopes – particularly of the Kent Ditch.
- 7) The features of natural character such as the banks of the Kent Ditch, the water and reed-filled drainage ditches, small fragments of ancient woodland and trees, patches of unimproved and semi-improved pasture and coastal and floodplain grazing marsh which add visual interest as well as biodiversity.

## 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) The line of pylons, which cut across the valley near Marshquarter Farm, detract locally from the rural ambience and reinforce this windswept, bleak character.
- 2) Development and land uses on the slopes of the neighbouring character area, e.g. large-scale regular blocks of woodlands in the surrounding areas are not sympathetic to the broad shallow nature of the valley and interrupt the unity of the landscape.
- 3) Loss and decline of hedgerow structure creates a more open, even desolate and neglected landscape. It lacks the cohesion of the smaller-scale farmland of the High Weald, without taking on the character of the great open horizons of the lower river levels.
- 4) The poor visual (and ecological) contribution made by the severely engineered riverbanks.

*Ensure that any future essential engineering works are sensitively carried out in visual and environmental terms. In the longer term, restoration of a more natural river profile to the heavily engineered sections, allowing natural flooding to continue, should be an objective.*

- 5) Areas of the valley landscape do not fulfil their ecological potential as a wetland habitat. Potential enhancements include:
  - 5.1 *Regeneration of bankside vegetation, removal of invasive alien species and restoration of former habitats such as wet meadows;*
  - 5.2 *Wildlife-sensitive management of the drainage ditches and watercourses, to include a reduction in the frequency of dredging operations and removal or control of invasive species;*
  - 5.3 *The restoration of permanent pasture alongside the river course as a buffer zone and to conserve visual and ecological continuity. Remaining areas of unimproved/semi-improved pasture should be maintained and opportunities for habitat re-creation sought, particularly to form a buffer zone along the water courses;*
  - 5.4 *The creation of a network of unploughed field margins and environmentally sensitive arable land management to enhance the landscape and habitat diversity of these extensive fields.*

## 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) Maintain the empty and 'remote' character. Within the open landscape of the Rother Valley Character Area any form of development has the potential to be highly visible and

intrusive. New development proposals should be carefully considered in terms of the potential impacts on perceptual character, including aiming to control development proposals both on the valley floor and the valley sides within neighbouring Landscape Character Areas.

- 2) Retain the long uninterrupted views down the valley, and almost complete absence of buildings and built elements.
- 3) Restrict new, potentially intrusive development on the valley floor, where the long empty views are a fundamental part of the local landscape character, or on adjacent ridgelines.
- 4) Restrict the introduction of further routes into the valley in the form of tracks and access/service roads which are not a feature of this area.
- 5) Maintain the essentially open character of the Rother valley. In this respect extensive woodland and tree screen planting to 'hide' development will not generally be appropriate.