

LOCATION

From Lamsden Common, north of Watton-at-Stone, this area extends northwards along the valley to Walkern and up as far as Cromer. It is defined to the west by the urban edge of Stevenage and to the east by the narrow Benington settled ridge and the Cottered/Ardleley settled plateau .

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

Open arable farmland with small grouped woodlands linked by hedges. Medium to large-scale field pattern over strongly undulating slopes, with a remote character despite proximity to Stevenage.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- strongly undulating west-facing slope
- sharp transition to ridge to east and to urban edge to west
- built edge of Stevenage generally well concealed and contained by mature and semi mature woodland.
- woods located to the tributary valley heads and on the upper slopes adjacent to Stevenage
- well-managed hornbeam coppice woodland
- large fields and arable cultivation
- few settlements
- expansive views from the edges to the Beane Valley

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

- historic features around Walkern
- Aston End village to the upper slopes a smaller scale intimate landscape with pasture

PHYSICAL INFLUENCES

Geology & Soils

Deep fine loamy over clayey and clay soils with slowly permeable subsoils, over plateau drift (Hornbeam 2 series), with well-drained calcareous loams over chalky drift on the valley slopes (Swaffham Prior series) and slowly permeable calcareous clay soils over chalky till (Hanslope series) on the plateau to the west. Chalk is visible at the surface on both sides of the river.

Topography

Strongly undulating valley slopes.

Degree of slope

1 in 10 on the steepest slopes to 1 in 40 further north.

Altitude Range

60 m to 100m.

Hydrology

A few streams flow into the river, especially south of Walkern, and the river has a significant impact on local topography, having carved out a well-marked U-shaped valley. The main source of the Beane is the springs to the north of the village. To the east a narrow plateau forms an interfluvium between the Beane valley and The Old Bourne tributary. The Beane has a predominantly natural chalk stream character, with shallow banks and gravel beds set within an intensively agricultural landscape, but now suffers from reduced flows due to water abstraction at Whitehall. There are no surface streams or ponds on the slopes to the north west.

Land Cover and Land Use

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Vegetation and Wildlife

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HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

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Field Pattern

Variable; usually large and regular or irregular (which is difficult to discern in the field at this scale) but occasionally appearing to be of a smaller scale around the farms. The large common arable fields of the area indicated by the survival of the names such as Churchend Common, probably originated in the late Saxon period and most survived well into the 19th century, in spite of piecemeal enclosure over the centuries. However the

area is now dominated by large fields enclosed in the 18th or 19th centuries, and by later, piecemeal, 20th century enclosure. There are also a few small areas where smaller fields suggest earlier, pre-18th century irregular enclosure. The arable regime led to woodland clearance at an early date, with the remaining areas of ancient woodland surviving only on the higher slopes on the western margin of the area. Small areas of 19th and 20th century woodland plantation have had little impact on its character.

Transport Pattern

Winding, narrow-verged lanes link to the wooded plateau settlements of the north east, which focus on Dane End. Whemstead (sic) Road marks the boundary between the valley slope and the plateau, while Walkern Road runs north/south below the plateau edge on the eastern valley slope. To the west a network of narrow lanes links Aston village and Aston End to the encroaching housing development on the edge of Stevenage.

Settlement and the Built Form

The central area and the river valley itself are unsettled, but there is settlement at the northern end and Aston village in the west, very close to the eastern edge of Stevenage. Until the mid-20th century Stevenage was a small town on the Great North Road and appears to have had very little influence on the landscape of this area

The oldest houses in Walkern date from the 17th century, often with Georgian facades over older structures. Its church has a 14th-century tower and a late Saxon sculpture above the south door. Walkern is described in Munby as 'one of the most attractive street villages in Hertfordshire...a medieval pattern of houses along the street, with crofts behind them and hedges marking the boundary with the arable fields behind' (p. 86)

Aston has a 13th-century church, while Aston House is of brick, c.1700, with chequer brick stables of the same date. The village has 16th-century cottages, with little building between the reigns of Elizabeth I and Victoria, but considerable development in the last quarter of the 20th century.

There are a few isolated farms, such as Whempstead Gate Farm and Gregory's Farm, but no hamlets.

Other Sources of Area Specific Information

Rowe, A. The Protected Valley, Hamels Publishing (1999).

Munby, L., The Hertfordshire Landscape, Hodder and Stoughton (1977).

VISUAL AND SENSORY PERCEPTION

From the outside this area is visible from the west, less so from the plateau to the east, being concealed by topography. The overwhelming impressions here are of remoteness, tranquillity and continuity, a sense that nothing has changed much over the centuries. Within the area there are quite extensive views as there is little woodland and the topography is quite simple.

Rarity and Distinctiveness

Although this area is similar to the boulder clay plateaux of the north-east of the county, this is its first expression in the centre of the county. It also demonstrates well the south west/north east shift in vegetation patterns across the county, with boulder clay and alluvial gravels on opposite sides of the river, both mixed with chalk.

VISUAL IMPACT

This area is quite widely visible due to its sloping landform and elevated position. It offers extensive views across the Beane valley, which to the east are blocked by the plateau landform. It is a simple, unified landscape of arable fields, rendered more interesting by the often sculptural shape of the landform. Despite the proximity of Stevenage to the west there is very little visual impact from the town.

ACCESSIBILITY

Readily accessible from both Stevenage and Hertford by A Roads, but unlikely to offer recreational opportunities due to the dominance of arable production. A Chain Walk links the extensive footpath network to Watton in the south, and a footpath runs up the valley from Frogmore Hill to Walkern. There are several footpaths from the development on the eastern edge of Stevenage.

COMMUNITY VIEWS

The Beane Valley has been promoted by HCC as a special project. There was insufficient data from the community exercise to establish a perceived level of distinctiveness; this area has been estimated as (D).

LANDSCAPE RELATED DESIGNATIONS

SAM : Earthworks in Box Wood
 Areas of Archaeological Significance:
 Landscape Conservation Area.
 SSSI: Benington High Wood.
 Heritage Roadside Verge: Walkern Road

CONDITION	
Land cover change	Localised
Age Structure of Tree cover	Mixed
Extent of Semi-natural habitat survival	Fragmented
Management of Semi-natural habitat	Good
Survival of Cultural pattern	Interrupted
Impact of built development	Low
Impact of land use charge	Low
STRENGTH OF CHARACTER	
Impact of land form	Prominent
Impact of land cover	Apparent
Impact of historic pattern	Continuous
Visibility from outside	Widely visible
Sense of enclosure	Open
Visual unity	Coherent
Distinctiveness / Rarity	unusual

Strengthen and Reinforce	Conserve and Strengthen	Safeguard and Manage
Improve and Reinforce	Improve and Conserve	Conserve and Restore
Reconstruction	Improve and Restore	Restore Condition to Maintain Character

IMPROVE AND CONSERVE

- Encourage landowners to safeguard existing hedges, increase hedged field boundaries, create permanent grass strips around field margins and prevent spray drift, using financial incentives as available, with a particular view to enhancing the quality of habitats adjacent to existing high-quality habitats in the Beane valley.
- Consider the possibilities of creating circular footpath routes in the area, especially from the re-opened railway station in Watton-at-Stone (adjoining area), to take advantage of views over the sculptural landform.
- Focus hedging opportunities on internal field boundaries, not those along roads and footpaths which could interrupt views over this area.
- Encourage the conservation of the existing settlement pattern and resist any extensive development which would significantly affect this.
- Consider the retention/replanting of trees along the watercourse to reflect its location. Care should be taken to select species that will reflect local distinctiveness and a quasi-waterside location but that can survive without a permanent water source.
- Continue to manage both the established and young woodlands to the western boundary with Stevenage to minimise the visual impact of the settlement on the landscape to the east.
- Encourage traditional woodland management measures including coppicing.