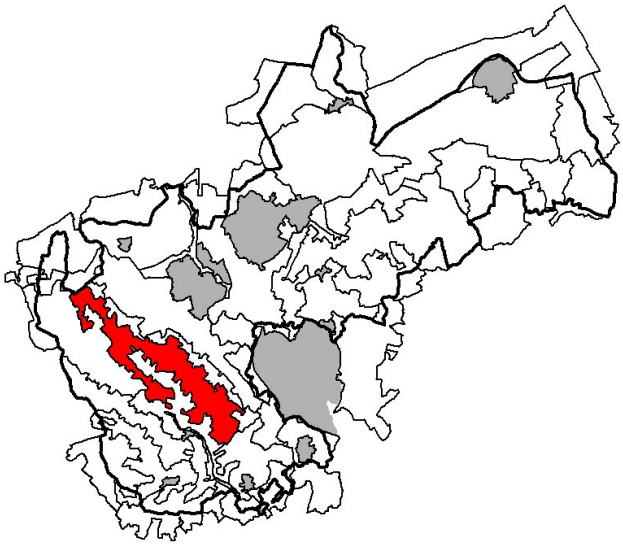
LOCATION



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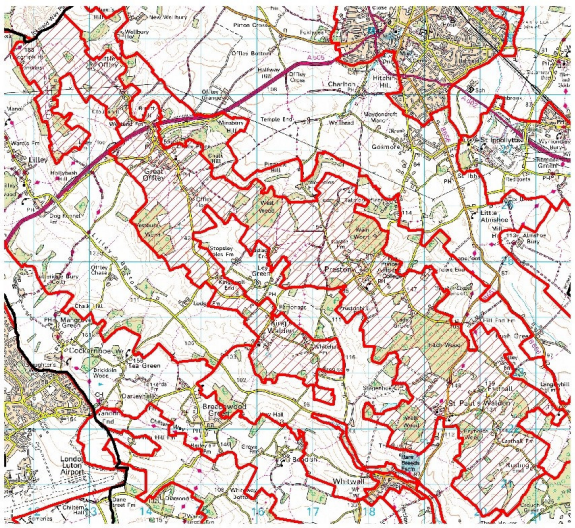
LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREA

The Character Area extends from Little Offley in the north to Crouch Green (south east of St Paul's Walden). It is long (approx 12.5 km) and comparatively narrow. Edges of the plateau are incised by various dry valleys.



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LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

Gently rolling upland landscape plateau dissected by incised valleys into smaller but still interlinked network of narrow arms extending from the scarp in the north to the lower lying but more developed land to the north of Codicote. Generally more open arable land in the north and more complex patterns to the south. Grazing land adjacent to settlements, varying sizes of woodland often visually interlocking to frame views. Field pattern large in arable areas, however, landscape is often crossed by old winding and sunken lanes. Parkland is a distinctive feature. Individual remnant mature hedgerow trees are a frequent feature in the north but remain an integral part of the hedgerows further south where coppice woodland is also common. Generally scattered settlements and farmsteads with occasional larger settlements.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- Gently rolling upland plateau landscape
- Large arable areas with smaller parcels of grazing land adjacent to settlements.
- Varying sized blocks of deciduous woodland
- Field pattern generally large scale

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

- Parkland at the Bury
- Kingswalden Deer Park
- Parkland of Little Offley and Lilley Hoo Drive

ASSESSMENT

PHYSICAL INFLUENCES

Geology & soils
Acidic Clay-with-Flints and Boulder Clay overlie Chalk except in the northwest where Chalk comes to the surface. Soil are generally free-draining loamy brown soils except where the clay is deep.

Topography
Plateau landscape incised by dry valleys.

Degree of slope
Varies between 1:40 and 1:100.

Altitude range
125m to 180m.

Hydrology
Plateau area drained by local ditches and drains. Numerous small ponds to the south of Great Offley and randomly distributed throughout.

Land cover and land use
Predominantly arable land use with grazing around local settlements. Extensive woodland cover.

Vegetation and wildlife
Ancient moderately acidic oak and hornbeam woodlands centred around Great Offley and Preston are the most ecologically important features of this Character Area. These woods are highlighted as being areas of high biodiversity within the Hertfordshire Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP). Hertfordshire contains a high proportion of the UK's national oak/hornbeam woodlands and these woodlands are afforded further protection by their listing on Annex 1 of the EU Habitats Directive.

Ancient semi-natural woodlands occur frequently with oak and hornbeam being the dormant canopy species. Coniferous replanting has also occurred in places. Maple, birch, cherry and ash may occur as secondary tree standards. Coppicing is frequently evident as a traditional form of woodland management, with hazel and hornbeam being the principal coppice species. Groundflora frequently contains species typical of a long continuity of woodland cover, the so-called 'ancient woodland indicator species' including bluebells especially frequent around Preston.

Hitch Wood is more acidic with bracken. It is a de-scheduled SSSI containing some of the tallest trees in Hertfordshire. Icehouses are present in several of the woodlands and provide refuge for protected species such as bats. Woodland ponds also occur frequently, and add to the ecological diversity and interest.

Other important ancient woodland areas include Reynolds Wood, Westbury Wood, Wain Wood and the Warren, which comprise a SSSI recognised for ancient oak/hornbeam communities which occur on boulder clay. Walk Wood partly incorporated into gardens is less acidic and more species rich.

Traditionally managed hay meadows such as Ruisling End Meadow are a scarce commodity, both within this Character Area and within North Hertfordshire as a whole. Wellbury Pit is a disused gravel pit with associated calcareous grassland and scrub communities also containing 'The Wellbury Boulder' – a 'calcrete' boulder of hardened glacial gravel which is of geological interest. Telegraph Hill lies within a key area of chalk grassland recognised as an area of biodiversity within the Hertfordshire BAP.

Hitch Wood is noted for woodland birds. Polecats and buzzards have become re-established, evidence of buzzards in woods around Great Offley, dormice are known in several locations and fallow deer are frequent. Parkland is important for veteran trees and there are ancient oaks present within Kingswalden Deer Park.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

During the 12th century Bernard de Baliol granted 15 librates of land at Wedelee to the Master and Brothers of the Knights Templars who formed the manor of Temple Dinsley. The original manor house may lie beneath the present Queen Anne mansion. At the time of the Domesday Survey the manor of Offley was of significant size at 8 hides 8 acres. Northwest of Great Offley are two prehistoric sites consisting of a ring ditch and at Lilley Hoo a Bronze Age barrow (also the site of 18th century horse racing). Earthworks near St Paul's Walden represent the remains of medieval house platforms. Medieval settlement sites are situated to the northwest and southeast where the 12th century parish church of All Saints and St. Paul stands.

Field pattern
The historic agricultural landscape is composed of a mixture of 18th century and later enclosure, prairie fields with post-1950s boundary loss, pre-18th century irregular enclosure, post-1950s enclosure and 19th-20th century plantation. Prairie fields with relict elements within lie to the north. Both St Pauls Waldenbury and Temple Dinsley are designated Historic Park and Gardens. St Pauls Waldenbury includes a Grade 1 listed garden (one of two in Hertfordshire) dating from the early 18th century.

ASSESSMENT

There is also a high frequency of ancient woodland, particularly in the vicinity of Preston and to the southeast. The parish of Offley was enclosed by an award under an Act of 1807 and for Kings Walden the Enclosure Act is dated 1796-7 and the common was closed by an award of 1802. Today there are large scale arable fields in the north of irregular pattern and scale.

Transport pattern
The area is well covered by a network of old winding and often sunken lanes. These disappear to the north of Great Offley. The area is crossed by the A505 dual carriageway running in a cutting.

Settlements and built form
The historic settlement pattern is composed of estates and villages. An example of a village migrating away from its original centre can be found at Great Offley and Little Offley. The 13th century church of St. Magdalene and Offley Place are situated together away from the road and probably formed the focus of the original settlement.

Another example of this can be found at Kings Walden where the original settlement with church attached to the manor house was abandoned in favour of a site along the road where the market would be located. Within Kings Walden and Ley Green there are a number of medieval and 15th century farmhouses and several 16th and 17th dwellings, all of which are Listed Buildings. The traditional buildings of the area survive from the 16th century and represent a range of styles. A late Tudor H-plan manor can be found at Little Offley, and Offley Place c.1825 with 17th century brickwork. Westbury Farm is timber framed c.1600, and there are several timber framed 16th and 17th century buildings in the village of Offley including Westbury Farm and the Green Man Inn. Later buildings of interest include the early Georgian house at Temple Dinsley enlarged by Lutyens in 1908 and The Bury at St. Pauls Walden, which underwent considerable Robert Adam and Neo-Elizabethan (1887) additions. The 13th century church of St Mary Magdalene conforms to the trend in building materials for the region by employing flint and stone.

EVALUATION

VISUAL AND SENSORY PERCEPTION

Historic and mature landscape character interspersed with areas of intensive arable production. Small interlocking blocks of woodland framing views.

Rarity & distinctiveness
The integrity and mature character have not been eroded by the intensification of arable production.

VISUAL IMPACT

A number of pylons, water towers and telecommunications masts (Great Offley) are distributed over the Character Area. Impact is only local.

ACCESSIBILITY

The Character Area is well served by the network of lanes and public rights of way.

COMMUNITY VIEWS

Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) have undertaken Tier B (Community of Place) consultations. Views of the local community have been sought and contributor's responses to each of the Character Areas will be analysed and a summary of the responses provided by HCC.

LANDSCAPE RELATED DESIGNATIONS

AONB	The Chilterns
LC1	Landscape Conservation Area
GD 1047	St Pauls Waldenbury
GD 1916	Temple Dinsley
SSSI	Wain Wood and The Warren
SAM 20623	Barrow at Telegraph Hill: Lilley

EVALUATION

CONDITION

Land cover change:	Widespread
Age structure of tree cover:	Mature
Extent of semi-natural habitat survival:	Scattered
Management of semi-natural habitat:	Good
Survival of cultural pattern:	Declining/Relic
Impact of built development:	Moderate
Impact of land-use change:	Moderate
Matrix Score:	**Moderate**

ROBUSTNESS

Impact of landform:	Apparent
Impact of land cover:	Prominent
Impact of historic pattern:	Prominent
Visibility from outside:	Locally visible
Sense of enclosure:	Partial
Visual unity:	Coherent
Distinctiveness/rarity:	Frequent
Matrix Score:	**Moderate**

CONDITION	GOOD	Strengthen and reinforce	Conserve and strengthen	Safeguard and manage
	MODERATE	Improve and reinforce	Improve and conserve	Conserve and restore
	POOR	Reconstruct	Improve and restore	Restore condition to maintain character
		WEAK	MODERATE	STRONG
		ROBUSTNESS		

EVALUATION

INHERENT LANDSCAPE SENSITIVITY

Landscape Character Sensitivities

- Offley – St Paul's Walden has an historic feel with large areas of parkland and estate landscapes, including around King's Walden, Little Offley and Preston. These could be at risk from inconsistent management or conversion to arable farmland
- Temple Dinsley and St Paul's Walden Bury historic parklands are registered gardens that fall partly within this Character Area, which could be at risk from development pressure and inconsistent management
- Mature field trees, avenues of trees and stands of pines associated with parkland areas would be at risk from removal or lack of a replacement strategy
- The historic settlement pattern within the Character Area is characterised by dispersed villages with historic cores and estates on the highest ground, which would be sensitive to unsympathetic development not in scale with the villages
- The A505 cuts through the Character Area but is in cutting and generally well screened by planting, which would be sensitive to removal.
- Large woodland blocks are present throughout Offley – St Paul's Walden, several of which are ancient and would be vulnerable to lack of management, encroachment of development or to removal
- A network of winding and often sunken minor lanes would be vulnerable to improvements to/upgrading of the roads
- Hedgerows are generally well maintained and the landscape would be sensitive to removal of hedges
- Good public access through numerous rights of way radiating from the villages, including the Chiltern Way and the Hertfordshire Way
- Part of the Character Area falls within the Chilterns AONB
- Pylons north of the A505, within the AONB, are detractors to the Character Area

Overall Offley – St Paul's Walden is considered to be of **moderate to high sensitivity**. The historic cultural pattern remains within large parts of the Character Area with very few detractors present.

Visual Sensitivities

- Much of Offley – St Paul's Walden is enclosed by woodland and vegetation, creating an intimate feel that would be sensitive to vegetation removal
- The urban edge of Luton to the west is generally well contained by vegetation and landform in views from the Character Area
- Occasional wider views, particularly across Lilley Bottom and Langley Valley
- Elevated distant views over Stevenage to the east are possible from areas within the south eastern part of the Character Area
- A number of pylons, water towers and telecommunications masts have created localised visual impacts

In visual terms, Offley – St Paul's Walden is considered to be of **moderate to high sensitivity**. Although there are localised visual detractors within the Character Area, there is a wide variety of different types of views within Offley – St Paul's Walden.

LANDSCAPE VALUE

Overall Offley – St Paul's Walden is considered to be of **moderate high landscape value**. Aspects of particular value within Offley – St Paul's Walden include the relative intactness of the landscape, the lack of visually intrusive elements, the distinctive sense of place, the sense of remoteness, the sense of openness and the striking landform.

EVALUATION

CAPACITY TO ACCOMMODATE DEVELOPMENT

Large urban extensions and new settlements (>5ha)
This type of development would not be appropriate within this Character Area, due to its strong cultural pattern of minor lanes and historic woodlands. It would be of an inappropriate scale and would be likely to result in the coalescence of existing villages. Visual impacts could also be high, due to the elevated position of the Character Area on a ridgeline. Increased housing development would be likely to affect the existing narrow, twisting lanes, which could erode the character of the landscape. Extensive development could also disrupt the rights of way network and could reduce accessibility to the countryside.
The landscape capacity for major urban extensions or new settlements is considered to be low.

Smaller urban extensions (<5ha)
This type of development would not be appropriate within this Character Area, due to the rural and undeveloped character and the historic intactness of Offley – St Paul's Walden. Planting would need to be used to soften the visual impacts of any consented development. Proposed development should also be pulled back from the edges of the ridge to prevent visual intrusion into Lilley Bottom and Langley Valley, as well as the Chilterns AONB. Some small scale expansion of the villages, carefully designed and in keeping with the existing character, could possibly be accommodated.
The landscape capacity for small urban extensions is considered to be low to moderate.

Major transport developments/improvements
This type of development would not be appropriate within this Character Area, due to the largely rural character of most routes at present. Upgrading of existing narrow, twisting lanes could erode the character of the landscape. Additional traffic would also affect the peace and tranquillity of the Character Area. Should improvements be required to the A505 these should be carefully design to avoid excessive visual intrusion into the Character Area.
The landscape capacity for major transport developments/improvements is considered to be low.

Commercial/warehouse estates
This type of large scale development would not be appropriate in the Character Area. There are not currently any large scale developments of this type within the area. The existing minor roads that form part of the strong cultural pattern could be affected by any proposed improvement schemes, which would erode an important element of this landscape. Extensive development could also disrupt the rights of way network and reduce accessibility to the countryside.
The landscape capacity for commercial/warehouse estates is considered to be low.

Individual large/bulky buildings
There may be some limited capacity for sympathetically located and designed individual large buildings, particularly if they were of a vernacular style and in keeping with the rural character. However, large buildings could be highly visible within this and adjacent Character Areas, if not carefully located, and could erode the strong cultural pattern.
The landscape capacity for individual large/bulky buildings is considered to be low.

EVALUATION

Large scale open storage
The strong cultural pattern of winding minor roads and woodland blocks would make it difficult to accommodate large scale 'open' uses. This would not be in keeping with the rural character of the area and likely to be very open to view, particularly from adjacent Character Areas. The existing minor roads could be affected by any proposed improvement schemes, which would erode an important element of this landscape. Extensive development could also disrupt the rights of way network and reduce accessibility to the countryside.
The landscape capacity for large scale 'open' uses is considered to be low.

Mineral extraction/waste disposal
This Character Area is currently relatively undisturbed and rural in appearance. Whilst some small scale mineral extraction could be accommodated within the small scale enclosed landscape with careful design and mitigation measures, larger scale extraction or waste disposal would not be in keeping with the character of Offley – St Paul's Walden. However, the existing minor roads that form part of the strong cultural pattern could be affected by any proposed improvement schemes, which would erode an important element of this landscape. Restoration proposals for any consented schemes should be mainly at grade and include for additional planting in character with existing patterns.
The landscape capacity for mineral extraction is considered to be low. Waste disposal would be a problem in all character areas due to the presence of aquifers.

Incremental small scale development
There may be some capacity for carefully located and designed small scale developments within the Character Area, particularly if they were of a vernacular style and in keeping with the rural character. However, any coalescence of settlements or visual intrusion into adjacent Character Areas should be avoided.
The landscape capacity for incremental small scale developments is considered to be low.

Utilities developments e.g. masts, pylons, wind turbines
There are currently relatively few intrusive structures within this Character Area, other than the localised impacts of pylons, water towers and telecommunications masts. New utilities developments or structures such as masts or wind turbines would have an impact on the rural character of Offley – St Paul's Walden. Large scale, tall structures such as these would be highly visible, particularly in surrounding Character Areas.
The landscape capacity for utilities developments is considered to be low.

GUIDELINES

STRATEGY AND GUIDELINES FOR MANAGING CHANGE

Strategy: Improve and Conserve

Landscape management guidelines

- Promote management of ancient woodland to encourage a diverse woodland flora
- Promote the creation of buffer zones between intensive arable production and areas of semi-natural habitat and the creation of links between habitat areas
- Promote hedgerow restoration along the lines of historic field boundaries and for the creation of visual links between existing woodland areas
- Promote the use of traditional field hedges in place of post and wire enclosures to new grazing areas
- Promote the diversity of hedgerow species and the planting of standard hedgerow trees
- Maintain and extend the rights of way network
- Encourage the development and implementation of management plans for parkland at the Bury, Kings Walden Deer Park, Little Offley and Lilley Hoo
- Encourage the planting of additional or new oak/hornbeam woodland

Built development guidelines

- Conserve the traditional character of the villages within Offley – St Paul's Walden, ensuring that any development located within or on the edge of the village uses appropriate vernacular materials and features to avoid inappropriate visual intrusion
- Protect and preserve the pattern of narrow winding lanes and associated hedge banks, sunken lanes, verges and hedges
- Encourage the retention and enhancement of vegetation along the A505 to ensure that its visual impact on the landscape is minimised
- Encourage the planting of appropriate broadleaved woodland and vegetation to screen new development that could intrude in panoramic and rural views
- Avoid the location of new development in visual intrusive locations, such as on the edges of the ridge or where they would be visible on currently undeveloped skylines
- Ensure that new development does not necessitate the removal of existing woodland blocks
- Conserve and enhance the registered parks and garden at Temple Dinsley and St Paul's Walden Bury
- Ensure that lighting necessitated by new development minimises the impact on the Character Area