

**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

<b>CONDITION</b>	
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
<b>STRENGTH OF CHARACTER</b>	
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

**EVALUATION**

**INHERENT LANDSCAPE SENSITIVITY**

**Landscape Character Sensitivities**

- The River Beane is generally well vegetated but not a significant feature of the Character Area. The vegetation would be sensitive to removal and the sinuous route of the river vulnerable to straightening. However, the river falls just outside the North Hertfordshire parts of the Character Area
- Hedgerows are generally good and maintained at a fairly tall height throughout the Character Area, although less present in the eastern area within North Hertfordshire. They would be vulnerable to poor management or removal
- Fragmented woodland blocks are located throughout the Character Area, although less present in the eastern area within North Hertfordshire. Much of the woodland is ancient and would be sensitive to poor management or removal
- Narrow winding roads, often with hedge banks or narrow verges, are present throughout the Character Area, although the B1037 in the eastern area within North Hertfordshire is a busier road. These routes would be vulnerable to 'improvement' schemes and removal of hedge banks
- The largely open and predominantly unsettled character, with little intrusion of adjacent built up areas, would be vulnerable to change

Overall Middle Beane Valley is considered to be of **moderate sensitivity**. The largely open Character Area would be sensitive to the introduction of unsympathetic elements and extensive development.

**Visual Sensitivities**

- Views into the valley within North Hertfordshire are generally from the east, with topography concealing views from the west
- Views along and across the valley are largely open due to the limited amount of fragmented woodland, although there is more enclosure within the western parts of the Character Area in North Hertfordshire
- Views from the edges of the valley are extensive
- The edge of Stevenage is currently well contained and there is little visual influence on the Middle Beane Valley
- The varied skyline when looking out of the valley

In visual terms, Middle Beane Valley is considered to be of **moderate sensitivity**. Views within the Character Area are relatively open. However, very few incongruous features or areas of settlement have impinged on views into the Character Area, despite the close proximity of Stevenage.

**LANDSCAPE VALUE**

Overall Middle Beane Valley is considered to be of **moderate low landscape value**. Aspects of particular value within Middle Beane Valley are the minimal number of incongruous elements, the relatively few transport routes through the area and the relative tranquillity, although there is a general lack of distinctiveness.

**EVALUATION**

**CAPACITY TO ACCOMMODATE DEVELOPMENT**

**Large urban extensions and new settlements (>5ha)**

This type of development would not be appropriate within the North Hertfordshire parts of this Character Area, due to its open rural nature in the east and the relatively small parcels of land in the west. It would introduce elements that would alter the character and affect the existing key characteristics such as the lack of large scale intrusive development. Increased housing development would be likely to affect the existing minor roads, which could erode the character of the landscape.

The landscape capacity for large urban extensions or new settlements is considered to be low.

**Smaller urban extensions (<5ha)**

This type of development would not be entirely appropriate within this Character Area, due to its rural and undeveloped character. There may be some scope for small scale expansion of Stevenage in the western parcel of land, carefully designed and in keeping with the existing character. Mitigation planting and retention of existing woodland would also need to be given careful consideration, to ensure that there is not visual intrusion into the wider Character Area.

The landscape capacity for small urban extensions is considered moderate in the west to low in the east.

**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 roads and lanes could erode the character of the landscape. Additional traffic would also affect the peace and tranquillity of 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 within the North Hertfordshire parts of this character area. There are not currently any large scale developments of this type within the North Hertfordshire areas and surrounding land uses are either residential or agricultural. Existing minor roads would be inappropriate for any significant larger volumes of traffic and/or HGVs.

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 an agricultural character and in keeping with the rural character. However, large buildings, if not carefully located, would intrude on the largely undeveloped Middle Beane Valley.

The landscape capacity for individual large/bulky buildings is considered to be low to moderate.

**Large scale open storage**

The openness of much of the Middle Beane Valley would make it difficult to accommodate large scale 'open' uses without significant visual impacts. This would not be in keeping with the rural character of the area and could introduce new elements that would conflict with the existing characteristics. There may be a need to upgrade local roads, which could further dilute the landscape character, and there is limited land available within the North Hertfordshire parts of the Character Area.

The landscape capacity for large scale 'open' uses is considered to be low.

**EVALUATION**

**Mineral extraction/waste disposal**

This Character Area is currently relatively rural in appearance with little intrusive development. Whilst some small scale mineral extraction could be accommodated with careful design and mitigation measures, larger scale extraction or waste disposal is likely to be highly visually intrusive due to cross valley views. There may be a need to upgrade local roads, which could further dilute the landscape character. 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 to moderate. 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 an agricultural nature and in keeping with the rural character. However, due to the existing open character any proposals would need clear justification to avoid visual intrusion into the Middle Beane Valley.

The landscape capacity for incremental small scale developments is considered to be low to moderate.

**Utilities developments e.g. masts, pylons, wind turbines**

There are currently very few detractors in the Middle Beane Valley. Utilities developments or structures such as masts or wind turbines are likely to have a major impact on the rural character of Middle Beane Valley. Large scale tall elements such as these would be highly visible within the Character Area, as well as in surrounding Character Areas.

The landscape capacity for utilities developments is considered to be low to moderate.

**GUIDELINES****STRATEGY AND GUIDELINES FOR MANAGING CHANGE****Strategy: Improve and Conserve**

NB. Guidelines apply only to land within North Hertfordshire.

**Landscape management guidelines**

- 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.
- 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.

**Built development guidelines**

- Retain the rural character of Middle Beane Valley, ensuring that any new development is appropriately sited and of a scale, form and style appropriate to the Character Area
- Avoid the location of new development in visually intrusive locations, such as on the edges of the valley where it would be visible on the currently largely undeveloped skyline
- Ensure that new development does not necessitate the removal of or incursion in to existing woodland blocks or hedgerows
- Ensure that new development on the edge of Stevenage is well contained by vegetation to continue the characteristic of little visual intrusion from the major urban area into the Character Area
- Encourage the conservation of the existing settlement pattern and resist any development which would significantly affect this.
- Ensure that lighting necessitated by new development minimises the impact on the Character Area
- Use the opportunity of any new developments to create new accessible green infrastructure