

2. What Makes this Particular Area Special?

Statement of Significance

- 2.1.** Forming part of the extensive belt of chalkland that stretches across southern central England, the Cranborne Chase AONB⁶ is a landscape of national significance. Its special qualities flow from the historical interaction of humans and the land. They include its diversity, distinctiveness, sense of history and remoteness, dark night skies, tranquillity; and its overwhelmingly rural character. With mists slowly forming over expansive downlands, it can be a moody, evocative landscape. The sights and sounds of bygone times never far away. It is an unspoilt and aesthetically pleasing landscape.
- 2.2.** Natural beauty is not just the visual appearance of the countryside. It includes the flora, fauna, geological and physiographical features; and the historic and cultural associations and our sensory perceptions of them. The combinations of these factors give each locality its own sense of place, contributing immensely to the quality of life.
- 2.3.** The AONB designation embraces a collection of fine landscapes, each with its different landforms, soils and wildlife habitats. Whilst the chalk downland is a dominant feature, the escarpments, valleys, greensand terraces and clay vales reflect the geomorphology and impact of the underlying geology. Sometimes the changes between these landscapes are slow and gentle; in other cases, such as above and below escarpments, they are quite swift and obvious. Views across and along these landscapes can be wide and expansive whilst in the valleys they are more focussed and channelled. Unspoilt and panoramic views are characteristic of this AONB.
- 2.4.** Hilltop earthworks, monuments, and tree clumps are features of the chalk downlands. They serve as landmarks to help orientate ourselves in these extensive landscapes. In historic terms, the landscapes of the AONB today are extraordinarily rich. Evidence of successive eras of human activity and settlements can often be lost: but not in this AONB. The landscapes offer up evidence of the imprint of man, carved out over the centuries; a continuous timeline throughout British history. Prehistoric monuments of national importance, historic borderlands, ancient field systems, droves and routeways all have stories to tell. The pioneering excavations and findings of General Pitt-Rivers, of the present day Rushmore Estate in Cranborne Chase, led to him being known as the ‘father of modern archaeology’.
- 2.5.** Eight thousand years ago, Neolithic peoples first started to change and manage this land. They built burial mounds and mysterious constructions, with many still seen today. The Bronze and Iron Ages saw the creation of large areas of pasture and arable farmland. The pastures on the downs date from this period. During the Anglo Saxon period, large landholdings began to change rural society. This was already a royal hunting area when the Normans invaded. They imposed forest law on the area then known as Cranborne Chase. However, agricultural expansion continued outside the Chase and by the fifteenth century, hedges and walls divided the land into large blocks. This trend continued as sheep production became very profitable and the wealthy built large houses with extensive parks. Forest law persisted in the Chase until 1829, leading to the retention of a high proportion of woodlands.

⁶ Cranborne Chase AONB - shorter name. At the AONB Partnership Panel meeting of 9th January 2014, it was resolved that the shorter name ‘Cranborne Chase Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)’ would be used on a day to day basis from that date. The legal title ‘Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)’ remains in place and unaffected.



- 2.6.** Since then, agriculture has changed rapidly but the settlement patterns are very similar to those that existed in the eighteenth century. There are more than 550 Scheduled Ancient Monuments, over 2,000 Listed Buildings and 17 Registered Parks and Gardens within the AONB.
- 2.7.** The AONB is of great ecological importance. It has 5 internationally, and 60 nationally, protected sites. These range from ancient downland, chalk rivers and meadows to scattered semi-natural ancient woodland, which include remnants of the medieval Cranborne Chase royal hunting area and the former Royal Forests of Selwood and Gillingham. There are also around 520 sites of local importance for wildlife comprising just over 9% of the AONB.
- 2.8.** Large, rectangular fields emphasise the open character of the chalk downs. The chalkland valley bottoms of the Rivers Wylde and Ebbel are mainly in permanent pasture, with many copses and hedgerows, whilst the ridges and valley sides are predominantly arable. In the northwest, the sandstone fringe of wooded ridges and valleys includes rich parklands such as Longleat and Stourhead. Agriculture, and its associated businesses, is still a significant employer together with commercial forestry and limited mineral extraction. In fact the paucity of mineral extraction is a feature of this AONB.
- 2.9.** The lush, wooded clay Vale of Wardour, harbouring the River Nadder, forms a broad wedge through the centre of the AONB, separating two large and distinct areas of largely arable chalk downland. To the south, there is the unusually wooded downland of Cranborne Chase itself, with its steeply cut coombes and dry valleys so typical of chalk landscapes. To the north, the West Wiltshire Downs are generally more elevated, rising up to Grovely Wood on the eastern ridge and from where, on a clear day, the huge chalkland plateau that is Salisbury Plain can be seen stretching northwards in the distance.
- 2.10.** The Integrated Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) (2003) draws together the features and attributes that contribute to the distinctive and outstanding character of the AONB. It explores the physical, ecological, visual, historic and cultural forces that shape the present day dynamic, working landscape, encompassing its social, economic and recreational characteristics. It identifies eight Landscape Types, each with distinct and relatively homogenous character with similar physical and cultural attributes, including geology, landform, land cover, and historical evolution. Four cover the chalk landscapes, two the greensand areas, and one each the clay vale and the hills between the chalk and the heathland outside the AONB. The individual characteristics of the fifteen geographical Landscape Character Areas are set out in the LCA.
- 2.11.** The Heritage Lottery funded (HLF) Cranborne Chase and Chalke Valley Landscape Partnership scheme has supported a more detailed LCA (2018) of this part of the AONB. It has fourteen Local Landscape Character Areas, which nest within the broader character areas of the earlier assessment.
- 2.12.** The Historic Landscape Characterisation (2008) describes and maps the historic and archaeological dimensions of the present day AONB landscape. Together with the Historic Environment Action Plans (2011), these two documents are a huge educational and management resource, charting the ever changing, living landscapes and the lives of those who made, and make, this their home; in essence a 'living library' and 'countryside encyclopaedia'.



- 2.13. Both local communities and visitors hold the immense cultural, historic and ecological riches in high esteem. The many diverse cultural associations include inspirational artists, writers, sculptors, poets, photographers and musicians. To name but a few, Heywood Sumner, Thomas Hardy, Desmond Hawkins, Cecil Beaton, Lucien Freud and Elisabeth Frink all took inspiration from Cranborne Chase and its hinterland. Cultural associations offer a greater awareness, understanding and appreciation of these evocative landscapes.
- 2.14. These aesthetic assets, together with panoramic views, dark skies awash with stars, the wealth of wildlife, plethora of historic sites, ancient droves and route ways, all offer opportunities for exploration, relaxation, walking and cycling. Residents and visitors alike turn to the landscapes and scenic beauty of the AONB to refresh the spirit as well as enhancing health and well-being. As sustainable rural tourism evolves, it offers growing support to this deeply rural economy.
- 2.15. This AONB is a deeply rural area with widely scattered hamlets, villages and narrow roads. This mainly agricultural landscape is sparsely populated, tranquil, and has no large settlements within its boundaries. Nearby market towns such as Salisbury, Shaftesbury, Blandford, Fordingbridge, Wimborne and Warminster are growth areas.

The setting of the AONB

- 2.16. The setting of an AONB is the surroundings in which the influence of the area is experienced. If the quality of the setting declines, then the appreciation and enjoyment of the AONB diminishes. The construction of high or expansive structures, or a change generating movement, noise, odour, vibration or dust over a wide area, will affect the setting. As our appreciation of the relationships between neighbouring landscapes grows, so our understanding of what constitutes the setting continues to evolve.
- 2.17. Views are one element of setting, being associated with the visual experience and aesthetic appreciation. Views are particularly important to the AONB. This is because of the juxtaposition of high and low ground and the fact that recreational users value them. Without husbandry and management, views within, across, from and to the AONB may be lost or degraded.

