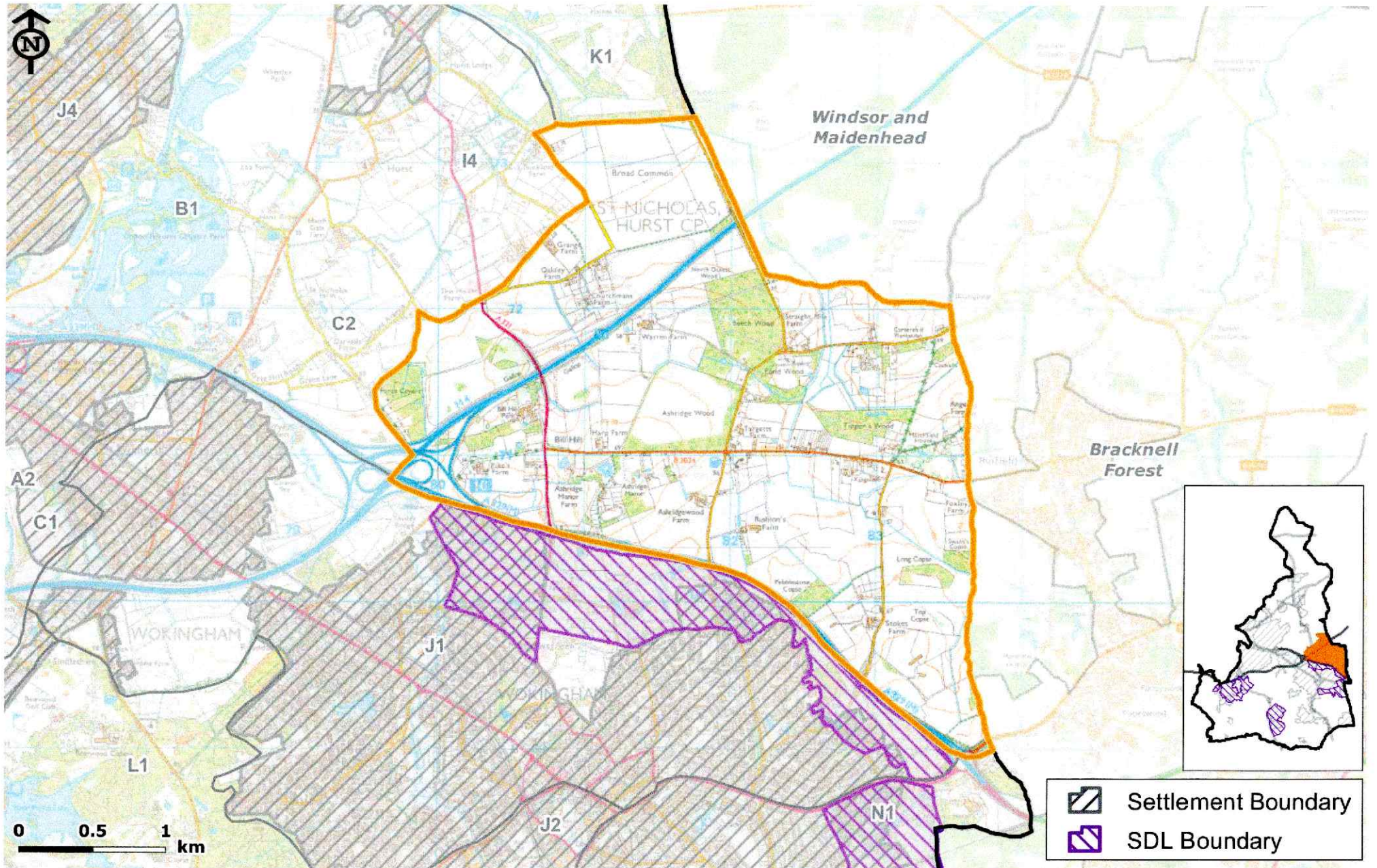




SUMMARY

A simple farmed landscape dominated by open arable fields and some pasture, with mature hedgerow trees marking former hedge lines. Wooded horizons created by large deciduous blocks line a subtle ridgeline, cut by a network of small tributary streams. Settlement is focused on ribbon development along the local roads, scattered farmsteads and manor houses. The strong rural character is only affected by the M4 and A329 (M) which cut through the area.

The Ashridge Farmed Clay Lowland is located in the centre east of Wokingham Borough. The A329 (M) motorway marks the southern boundary which represents the urban edge of J1: Wokingham-Winnersh Settled and Farmed Clay. The borough boundary marks the eastern extent, although the character extends into Bracknell Forest and Windsor and Maidenhead. The northern and western boundaries are more complex and are related to the distinctive flat landscape of C2: Hurst River Terrace, the wetland character of K1: Stanlake Farmed Sand and Clay Lowland and the related but distinct landscape of I4: Hurst Farmed Clay Lowland with its smaller field system and greater proportion of paddocks.



Key Characteristics

- **Large scale rolling to gently undulating landform** between 40m AOD and 75m AOD, rising to a subtle ridgeline. The area is underlain by London Clay with localised river terrace gravel deposits in more elevated locations.
- **Waterlogged clay soils have resulted in numerous farm ponds, drainage channel and small watercourses** although these are often hidden from view. A network of small streams relate to the Emm Brook, a tributary of the River Loddon.
- **Large geometric blocks of deciduous woodland**, often BAP priority habitat and some of ancient origin, create wooded horizons. Many are designated as LWS (Furze Covert, Pond Wood, Tippen's Wood, North Ockett Wood, Swain's Copse and Long Copse). Pebblestone Copse adjacent to the A329 (M) has BAP priority habitat wet woodland.
- **Agricultural landscape defined by large, open, geometric arable fields of irregular shape.** Hedgerows are largely lost or denuded, although mature oak standards remain a common feature of fields and along roadsides.
- **Pastoral farming** associated with the manors along the ridge (e.g. Ashridge Manor and Bill Hill) and a **number of stud farms, gallops**, particularly adjacent to the A329 (M) and M4.
- **Sparse settlement comprising ribbon settlement along the ridgeline and scattered manor houses and farmsteads**, the latter typically built with traditional brick, weatherboard and clay tile, although there is no overriding local vernacular. There are clusters of Grade II listed buildings at Bill Hill Park and Ruston's Farmhouse.
- **Historic parks and gardens** at Billingbear and Bill Hill Park, Hurst which are locally listed.
- **Straight and narrow roads with banks and ditches**, lined by woodland and rhododendron in the east. This grid pattern reflects post-medieval routes through the former forest landscape, which once fell within The Royal Forest of Windsor.
- **Rural and peaceful character**, although this is eroded locally by noise and movement along the A329 (M) and M4 motorways.
- **The open landscape allows framed and distant views over the surrounding area** including to the northern edge of Wokingham town, with its prominent church spire and east to the woodland in neighbouring Bracknell Forest. The wide horizons are affected by pylons and poles.

Natural Landscape

- I1.1 The landform is transitional occurring at between 40m and 75m AOD and has a broadly undulating to rolling character rising from the flatter areas located in the north around Broad Common to a gentle ridgeline crossing west-east from the subtle hill at Bill Hill towards Binfield. The area is underlain by a broad belt of stiff blue London Clay, which has given rise to impeded drainage and occasionally waterlogged conditions.
- I1.2 Numerous small watercourses and drainage channels cross the landscape, although they are generally hidden from view. South of Ashridge Wood there are small southerly draining reaches of Emm Brook, a tributary of the River Loddon. North of the ridge the branching network of tiny streams relates to the upper reaches of Billingbear Brook, which flows into the River Loddon.

Along the course of these streams a number of small ponds have been created. Ponds have also been formed associated with the farmsteads and manors.

- I1.3 This lowland clay vale landscape is suited to arable farming and there are numerous large arable fields that have been continuously amalgamated resulting in the loss of hedgerows. Remnant oak standards mark many of these former hedge-lines and are a feature of the landscape. Permanent and improved pasture, which is dominated by sheep grazing, tends to be associated with manors along the ridgeline. These areas also display a more heathy character, including birch (*Betula*) and bracken with gorse (*Ulex*). Stud farms and equestrian centres with associated gallops also occur, particularly along the motorways. These are uncommon within Wokingham Borough, and are less formal than those of the Berkshire Downs.
- I1.4 Wooded horizons are characteristic of this area. These are created by woodland within this landscape and in the adjoining areas, such as the wooded boundaries on the edge of Wokingham. The area includes a large proportion of woodland arranged in straight-edged blocks or more irregular large copses. The woodland is often associated with the ridgeline, such as the linear shelterbelts of Ashridge Wood, or located adjacent to the tributary streams, as at Pond Wood. These woodlands are often BAP priority habitat lowland mixed deciduous woodland, and ancient and are designated as Local Wildlife Sites (LWS). Pebblestone Copse contains BAP priority habitat wet woodland. The area around Ashridge Wood, Beech Wood, Pond Wood and Tippen's Wood is part of the Waltham to Binfield Woodlands and Parklands BOA and has been identified as a target for habitat restoration and positive management of woodland and creation of lowland meadow habitats.
- I1.5 Mixed woodlands including ornamental conifers and small areas of parkland are found particularly adjacent to the manor houses. Coniferous trees and hedges define the boundaries of many of the smaller properties.

Cultural Landscape

- I1.6 Although Mesolithic and Neolithic finds indicate exploitation of the woodland, there is no evidence of settlement until the Romano-British period.
- I1.7 This area fell within The Royal Forest of Windsor. There was a medieval deer park at Billingbear, first mentioned in 1208. The parkland around Billingbear Park is now cultivated land, although two fishponds remain. The 'Bear' name is possibly indicative of the presence of 'bare' or swine pasture. It has also been suggested locally that it could relate to the ancient practice of bear baiting within the borough. There was also a park at Ashridge in 1319, which originated as an assart in The Royal Forest of Windsor and reverted to the Crown in the 15th century. Large areas of woodland survive, such as Tippen's Wood, but Ashridge Wood survives only around the margins of its former extent.
- I1.8 The large rectangular fields on Broad Common represent the amalgamation of a regular grid of earlier fields, themselves the product of the Parliamentary enclosure of the former common. There is a similar pattern extending south to Forest Road, one of a grid of predominantly straight roads that cross the area, representing the post-medieval opening up of the woodland.
- I1.9 The former forest landscape is reflected in the generally low level of settlement, there being no villages and only widely dispersed farmsteads. The pattern of narrow land-parcels associated with individual dwellings strung out along Forest Road, for instance at Kingscote, represents late 19th and 20th century development. Bill Hill house, listed at Grade II, is an early Georgian country house altered in the 19th century, and also had a landscaped park, which partially survives and is locally listed as a Historic Park and Garden. Billingbear Park, now in use as a golf club, is also locally listed and was originally a much larger medieval deer park. It was associated with a Tudor mansion of the same name, which burned down in 1924 and the extent of the original park can be reconstructed from maps and surviving field patterns and extends across the district boundary.
- I1.10 To the south of Forest Road, and east of Ashridgewood Farm, there is a pattern of medium to large field with wavy boundaries. The first edition OS map shows a pattern of smaller irregular fields interspersed with areas of surviving woodland, indicating early assart incursions of the forest. However, there has been a considerable degree of boundary loss since then, resulting in

medium to large, but still irregular fields. A brick kiln and brickfield, shown on the first edition OS map south of Billingsbear Park, indicates the exploitation of the London Clay for brick making.

- I1.11 Despite the proximity of the area to the major urban centres of Wokingham and Bracknell, the area retains a rural character. It is mostly unaffected by potential suburbanising influences despite the extension of Wokingham town along the area boundary south of the A329 (M) as part of the North Wokingham SDL, although views are changing towards Wokingham when travelling south out of the LCA due to this development. There are no villages and hamlets and the most concentrated settlement is located along the ridgeline where there is a ribbon of small, detached houses. Generally the settlement pattern is very low density, dominated by farmsteads and manor houses that occur across the area at regular intervals, the drives of which lead down from the ridge. There is no overriding local vernacular although traditional brick and clay tile are present and dark weatherboarding is also used on residences and agricultural buildings.
- I1.12 Throughout this area most of the roads are straight, small scale and rural in character without kerbing or intrusive signage and include wide verges, banks and/or water-filled ditches. Forest Road, Maidenhead Road and Straight Mile in the east are wooded and tree-lined, with some rhododendron planting. There are few footpaths and little access across the large arable fields.
- I1.13 The junction between the M4 and A329 (M) sits in the southwest corner of this area, and these motorways have an urbanising influence on character. The motorways introduce noise and movement, and there are dense screening coniferous belts in some sections. The A321 is a busy road which passes north-south through this landscape crossing both motorways and severs a triangle of land around Pikes Farm and Bill Hill at the extreme west of the ridgeline.

Perceptual Landscape

- I1.14 The distinctive large scale rolling landform rises to a subtle ridgeline from which there are views over the surrounding area, including views towards the town of Wokingham and the prominent church spire, and to the woodland of Bracknell Forest. Despite its proximity to Wokingham town, the urban area does not strongly influence the intrinsic rural character of this area except where directly adjacent to the new development on the northern edges of Wokingham.
- I1.15 This landscape is open and large scale permitting intermittent framed and distant views, although screening planting along the motorways disturbs this open character. Away from the motorways the area has a peaceful and rural character, with localised experience of dark skies to the north of the area.
- I1.16 Much of Alexander Pope's poetry was inspired by The Royal Forest of Windsor, which extended into this character area. Between 1701 and 1716, Pope resided at Whitehill House, Binfield (now Pope's Manor). And although his residence was outside of the Wokingham boundary in Bracknell Forest District to the east, his work was inspired by the countryside around him. In 1704, Pope started working on his poem Windsor Forest and although of ill-health at the time, produced a piece of work regarded as one of his finest. The opening lines read:

*Thy forests, Windsor! And thy green retreats,
At once the Monarch's and the Muse's seats,
Invite my lays. Be present, sylvan maids!
Unlock your springs, and open all your shades.
Granville commands; your aid O Muses bring!
What muse for Granville can refuse to sing?*

*The groves of Eden, vanish'd now so long,
Live in description, and look green in song:
These, were my breast inspir'd with equal flame,*

*Like them in beauty, should be like in fame.
Here hills and vales, the woodland and the plain,
Here earth and water, seem to strive again;
Not Chaos like together crush'd and bruis'd;
But as the world, harmoniously confus'd.*

Valuable Landscape Attributes

- **Strong rural character** of the rolling agricultural landscape with its subtle wooded ridges, large woodlands and sparse settlement which create a strong sense of place.
- **Large deciduous woodland blocks**, including BAP priority habitats and ancient woodland, provide scenic variety and a sense of enclosure in the open landscape as well as important ecological habitats.
- **Characteristic mature in-field and roadside oaks** in the open arable fields which provide a sense of place.
- **The locally listed historic parkland** at Billingbear and Bill Hill Park.
- **Wooded skyline** which provides a backdrop to the surrounding areas.
- **Remote quality** due to the scarcity of settlement and relative inaccessibility by footpath which results in a sense of tranquillity despite proximity to urban centres and motorways.
- **Association with Alexander Pope** who was inspired by this landscape.
- **Distant framed views** over the surrounding landscape, including to Wokingham town and wooded horizons outside the borough which provides a sense of place and orientation.

Landscape Condition

The rural character of the landscape with its variety of characteristics such as the wooded ridgelines with small tributary valleys, woodlands and sparse settlement are in **good condition**. However, former coppice woodlands have been neglected, and many hedgerows have been lost. There is also an erosion of tranquillity due to the disturbance from the motorways.

Key Issues

- Loss of deciduous woodland or changes in woodland structure through loss of species diversity of the traditionally coppiced woodlands has occurred in the past through cessation of coppice management, leading to a change in character. However, there are positive signs that woodlands are being brought back into management.
- Effects on tree health or species composition of woodland as a consequence of pathogens and climate change.
- Spread of sycamore, rhododendron and other invasive/exotic species into native deciduous woodland is threatening the locally distinctive species composition of these woodlands.
- Hedgerow loss associated with the expansion of fields and intensification of agriculture.
- Past use of fertilisers and pesticides resulted in a polluted run-off affecting water quality and biodiversity, although in more recent years there has been an improvement in water quality.

- Lack of the recruitment of young trees (through natural regeneration or planting) required to rebalance the age structure of parkland and hedgerow trees is an on-going threat to the character of the landscape.
- Demand for large-scale agricultural buildings leading to visual intrusion of these elements.
- Demand for residential or commercial development resulting in linear development along the straight roads.
- Pressure for large scale residential development and supporting infrastructure extending north of the A329 (M) from Wokingham town and impacting on local landscape character. Ongoing development along the southern boundary of the area, as part of the North Wokingham strategic development, south of the A329 (M) could potentially impact the rural character of the area.
- Pressure for built development on the skyline leading to loss of wooded ridges which are characteristic of the Wokingham landscape.
- Increasing transport pressures on rural roads as a result of traffic taking diversions to avoid delays in adjacent urban areas leading to loss of tranquillity, erosion of road verges and increased levels of air pollution in rural areas. This also leads to demands to upgrade the network of rural lanes with new signage, line painting and widening, threatening the rural character of the lanes.
- This character area contains localised areas of 'dark skies' but light pollution is a key issue affecting the night landscape.
- Increasing demand for communication masts, pylons and poles leading to visual intrusion of these elements in the open landscape.

Landscape Strategy

To maintain the landscape character of the *Ashridge Farmed Clay Lowlands* the following strategy is required: to conserve and enhance the existing rural character.

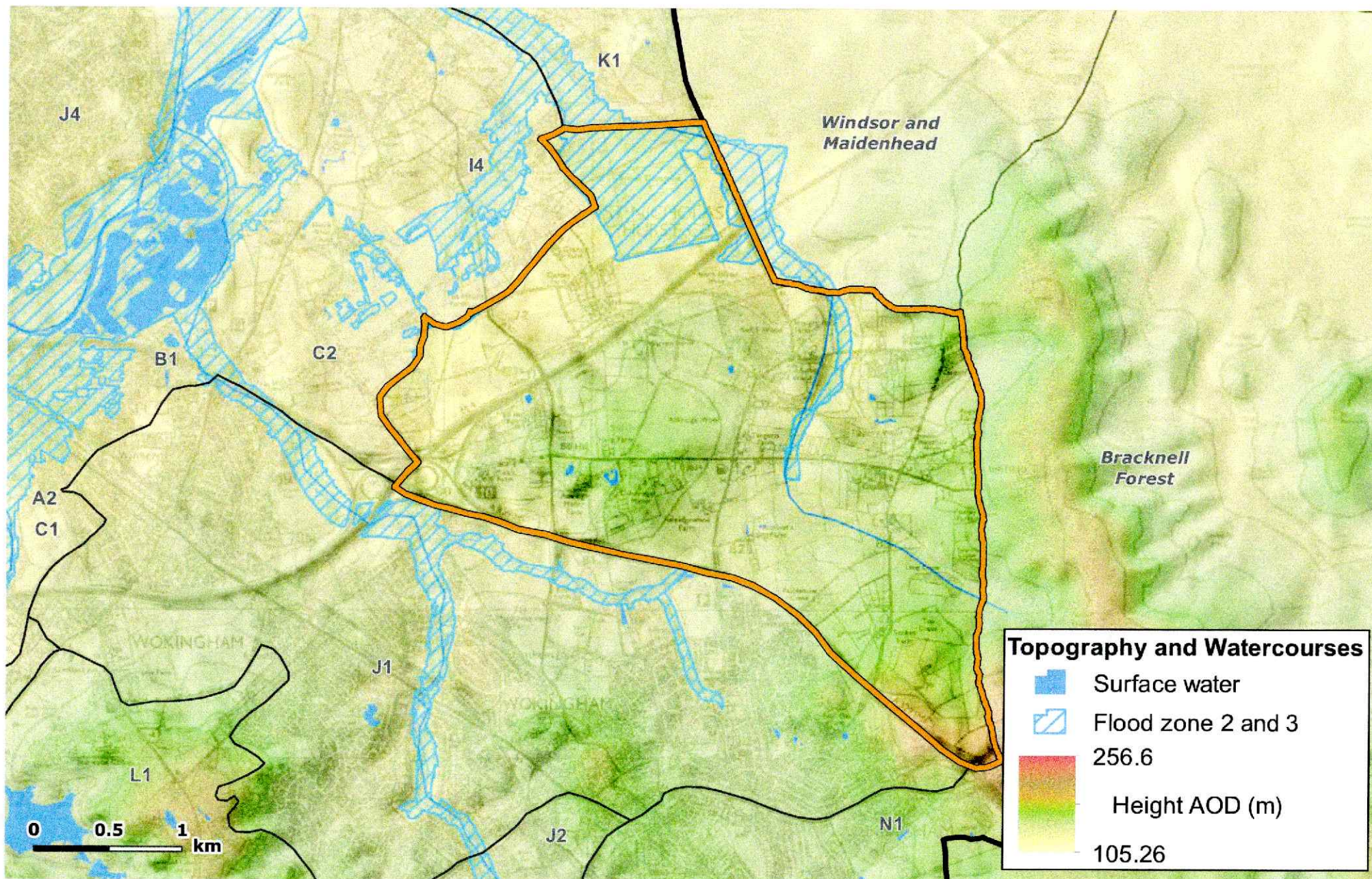
The key aspects to be conserved and actively managed are the characteristic wooded ridges and woodland, including ancient woodland. In particular there are opportunities to restore coppice management, and reinstate and repair key hedgerows with hedgerow standards.

In terms of development, the aim is to conserve the sparse settlement pattern through controlling development.

Landscape Guidelines

- **Conserve and manage existing woodland blocks** including BAP priority habitats and ancient woodland. Continue to promote appropriate management through natural regeneration, control of non-native species and coppicing as a management tool for neglected woodland.
- **Conserve and enhance the wooded character of the landscape by increasing the extent of native deciduous woodland**, in order link to other woodland habitats. Seek to avoid introduction of coniferous boundaries and shelterbelts.
- **Conserve the open and rural qualities of the landscape** away from the motorways. Manage and enhance the wildlife interest of agricultural fields by encouraging the creation of uncultivated field margins and other wildlife-friendly farming methods around intensively farmed fields.
- **Reinstate or repair hedgerows with native species** and reconnect remnant standard oak trees with restored historic hedgelines where there are opportunities to do so. Plan for the next generation of hedgerow trees with a programme of tree planting.

- **Conserve and protect the rural landscape pattern of mixed arable and pasture fields**, and encourage appropriate management of grassland by grazing. Manage and enhance the wildlife interest of agricultural fields by encouraging creation of uncultivated field margins and other wildlife-friendly farming methods around both pasture and arable land.
- **Conserve, enhance and manage woodland habitats**, also protect particularly from changes in land use. An area of land around Ashridge Wood is part of the Waltham to Binfield Woodlands and Parklands BOA. This network of natural habitats, which extend into Bracknell Forest, has been identified as a target for habitat restoration and positive management of woodland and creation of lowland meadow habitats. An appropriate woodland management regime is critical.
- **Conserve and enhance the integration of urban edges** through wooded boundaries and large-species trees to provide visual screening and a positive interface between the built up and rural areas that provides an appropriate setting for Wokingham town.
- **Maintain the sparse settlement pattern of dispersed farms** through control of new development, avoiding linear spread of development, and the extension of urban areas north of the A329 (M).
- **Enhance sense of place through careful design** (including siting, massing, scale, materials and landscape – and sensitive lighting to retain dark skies at night) to minimise the likely impacts of any new development on valuable attributes.
- **Maintain and enhance the character of rural lanes** resisting unsympathetic highways improvements, infrastructure and signage. Consider the use of traffic calming and access restrictions to maintain the tranquillity of the most rural areas. This would also make the use of rural roads more attractive for cyclists and recreational users.
- **Conserve, enhance and manage the parkland landscape** associated with Billingbear and Bill Hill Parks.
- **Enhance the integration of the motorways and A321 through appropriate woodland, tree and hedgerow planting**. Encourage retention of wooded edges and boundaries along all roads and minimising fencing and other boundary structures.
- **Conserve wooded character of undeveloped skylines**. Consider the impact of any development on skylines, particularly where it would have the potential to be highly visible from adjacent character areas including Wokingham town. Develop sympathetic fell cycles to maintain positive character, particularly phased cycles along sensitive skylines to ensure that the wooded backdrop is maintained. Particular care should be taken in the siting of communication masts or other vertical elements, which have the potential to be highly visible in this open landscape.
- **Protect distant views to wooded hills** across the open landscape. Particular care should be taken in the siting and design of pylons or other vertical elements, which have the potential to be highly visible in the open landscape.
- **Protect the perceptions of rural tranquillity in the landscape**, through the management of development.



I1: Ashridge Farmed Clay Lowland

