



SUMMARY

This area occupies the flat alluvial floodplain of the River Loddon and its tributaries the Broadwater and the Blackwater. An agricultural landscape of irregular fields, with large scale arable fields on better drained areas and small scale wet meadows on frequently flooded land adjacent to the river. A largely peaceful area, disturbance comes from major roads which cross the floodplain including the M4, and adjacent developments in Earley, Winnersh, the expanding settlement of Shinfield and new Science and Innovation Park.

The southern boundaries of this area are defined by the borough boundary, although the character area extends into the adjoining districts (West Berkshire and Hart). The northern boundary is confined by the industrial edge of Winnersh and the Loddon Bridge, where industry and infrastructure mark the end of the tranquil rural landscape of the Loddon Valley. The eastern and western boundaries are defined by the geological extent of the river alluvium and river terrace deposits which occupy the valley floor and marked changes in topography on the valley sides of the adjacent character areas.



Key Characteristics

- A broad, flat alluvial floodplain around 40-45m AOD underlain by riverine alluvium and river terrace deposits. The alluvial soils are affected by high groundwater levels, while the loamy soils on the low ridges of the river terrace gravels are better drained and in use as arable fields.
- The River Loddon follows a meandering course within braided channels. There are a system of sluices and weirs along the course of the river, at Arborfield, Sheep Bridge and Stanford End. Streams and tributary rivers join the Loddon including the rivers Broadwater and Blackwater in the southeast of the area. There are ponds, oxbow lakes and pools of standing water on the valley floor.
- A wooded backdrop is provided by scattered blocks of deciduous woodland and copses, interlinked woodland belts and scattered mature trees and scrub. The semi-natural woodlands include frequent areas of Ancient Woodland, all of which are designated as LWSs.
- Pasture and arable farmland in medium and large irregular geometric fields, divided by post and wire fencing, post and rail fencing, gappy hedgerows and drainage ditches. The areas closest to the river are affected by flooding and are characterised by pasture and wet meadow.
- Wetland character, including BAP priority habitats of floodplain grazing marsh, wet woodland, lowland fen and lowland meadows which contain characteristic features such as willow pollards. Six areas with wetland character are designated as LWS. South of Sheepbridge an area of waterlogged hay meadow is designated as the Stanford End Mill and River Loddon SSSI, which supports nationally important populations of fritillary (*Fritillaria meleagris*) and the Loddon pondweed (*Potamogeton nodosus*), while the full length of river north of Sheepbridge is an LWS.
- Important historic riverside features include traditional brick humpback bridges and water mills e.g. Sindlesham Mill and Sindlesham Bridge and the Mill at Swallowfield (all Grade II listed). Moated sites are present at **Beaumy's Castle and Sheepbridge Court** and designated as Scheduled Monuments.
- Extensive designed parkland landscape at Swallowfield Park (designated as a Registered Park and Garden) which leads down to the River Loddon with grassland and mature oaks and specimen trees including cedars of Lebanon, and a Grade II listed 18th century bridge.
- The GHQ Stop Line (General Headquarters Line), a defensive zone built during the summer of 1940 to contain the threatened German invasion ran east from Bristol to the Thames Estuary and included a section along the Foudry Brook, the Loddon, the Broadwater and the Blackwater.
- Low-density scattered settlement pattern of villages and farmsteads characterised by traditional warm red brick and timber framed vernacular evident in cluster of listed buildings in Swallowfield village Conservation Area.
- Tranquil and rural character away from river crossings and visual influence of large scale settlement in adjacent areas. The south of the area is also a resource of 'dark skies'.
- Little public access to the floodplain except for the Blackwater Valley Path which runs south and east of Swallowfield. Busy roads cross the flood plain, including the A33, M4 and Winnersh and Shinfield Eastern Relief Roads, and create physical and visual severance along the floodplain.
- Pylons, residential and commercial development are distinctive visual features in this open and flat landscape, with development very visible along the edges of this character area. The new landmark Science and Innovation Park building at Shinfield is a notable feature in the

landscape.

Natural Landscape

- A2.1 The character of the Loddon River Valley is influenced by the River Loddon, a tributary of the Thames. The river occupies only a small part of the floodplain and its presence is only revealed close to its banks or in the tranquil water meadows that lie alongside the river. The river is branched and braided, for example north of Arborfield Bridge where a system of sluices and weirs mark the site of the old Arborfield Mill, now a water pumping station. The river also branches significantly at Salter's Bridge, Swallowfield and at Sindlesham Mill, north of the M4. There are also numerous ponds, oxbow lakes and pools of standing water on the valley floor.
- A2.2 The landform comprises a flat floodplain that lies between 40 and 45m AOD. It is underlain by riverine alluvium and younger River Terrace deposits of the Loddon and Brickearth. These give rise to Pelo-Alluvial Argillic Gley soils that are affected by high groundwater levels. The loamy soils that overlie the younger river terrace gravels are better drained and are in use as arable fields. The areas closer to the river are affected by short term flooding and are characterised by pasture and wet meadow. The wet meadows are an important resource and wet woodland provides a sense of enclosure and hidden character that contrasts with the open floodplain beyond. The presence of pollarded willow is characteristic of the river corridor.
- A2.3 The landscape is dominated by mixed agriculture of irregular fields, with large-scale arable fields occupying better drained areas and small scale wet meadows occurring on frequently flooded land adjacent to the river. The fields are divided by drainage ditches and post and wire fencing. Where hedgerows occur they are low flailed, species poor and discontinuous, forming the remnants of a former network.
- A2.4 BAP priority habitat lowland mixed deciduous woodland and coniferous copses and coverts form isolated geometric blocks within the wider mixed farmland. These woodlands provide shelter for wildlife as well as a green backdrop to views across the floodplain. The historic parkland of Swallowfield Park, imparked by Edward III and a royal residence until the Tudor era, has a localised influence on the character of the floodplain with scattered parkland trees (mature oaks) and woodland belts forming features within the open floodplain.
- A2.5 The Loddon River Valley character area has retained significant biological interest and is characterised by scattered BAP priority habitats including wet woodlands and grasslands, which are now mostly restricted to the banks of the river channel. The valley is particularly notable for the nationally important Stanford End Mill and River Loddon SSSI, which comprises a 4km stretch of the River Loddon together with a series of traditionally managed, seasonally waterlogged hay meadows. This site supports rich plant communities and is of special interest for its thriving populations of two rare plants, the fritillary (*Fritillaria meleagris*) which is now mainly confined to scattered localities in southern Britain, and a national stronghold of Loddon pondweed (*Potamogeton nodosus*). The site is also associated with a number of notable aquatic and wetland mollusc species, including two rare pea mussels (*Pisidium moitessierianum* and *P. tenuilineatum*), and two rare snails *Vertigo antivertigo* and *V. moulinsiana*.
- A2.6 The valley also supports twelve areas designated as Local Wildlife Sites (LWS), for their woodland, wet woodland and fen habitats. These include four Ancient Woodlands. The wet woodlands are dominated by alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) and crack willow (*Salix fragilis*) and are particularly notable for supporting important populations of Loddon lily (*Leucojum aestivum*).

Cultural Landscape

- A2.7 As with the Thames Valley, the Loddon was an early focus of human activity and cultivation of the fertile valley floor may have commenced during the Neolithic with cultivation on the valley sides leading to alluvial deposition on the floodplain below. Cropmarks, including ring ditches, and Bronze Age finds, provide evidence of continuous prehistoric/Romano-British settlement and

farming along the Loddon. The Roman road between London and Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester), **known locally as the Devil's Highway**, runs for a short length across the LCA at Riseley Common.

- A2.8 The area was part of the Royal Forest of Windsor from Norman times but before that, the “-feld” element of place names such as Arborfield and Swallowfield, suggests a largely open and cultivated landscape during the Saxon period. The focus of medieval and later settlement was on the valley sides, with settlement on lower ground consisting mainly of dispersed farmsteads sited at the edges of the floodplain, probably set within open fields along the river gravels and common meadows on the floodplain.
- A2.9 The large straight-sided fields along most of the valley indicate Parliamentary enclosure of early 19th century. Small areas with less regular fields interspersed with small parcels of woodland, shown on the first edition OS map, indicate earlier assart enclosures, although few traces of these survive due to recent amalgamation of fields.
- A2.10 This area has the greatest concentration of moated sites in the borough, due to its physical, defensive, features. In the medieval period the construction of moats was a popular way of enhancing the status and appearance of a manor, or other large house, such as that at Sheepbridge Court. The moated site at **Beaumont's** Castle is a rare example of one which was designed for defensive purposes. A number of 17th and 18th century country houses were surrounded by areas of landscaped parkland. Traces of parkland are still visible around the site of the now demolished Arborfield Hall, and at Swallowfield Park (Grade II listed Registered Park and Garden), which incorporates the woodland and open parkland of an earlier medieval deer park. Swallowfield Park also has an old walled garden, now planted in the Arts and Crafts Style, and a woodland walk leading down to the quiet flowing River Loddon.
- A2.11 A more recent historic feature of the Loddon Valley is the GHQ Stop Line, a defensive zone built during the summer of 1940 to contain the threatened German invasion. The line ran east from Bristol to the Thames Estuary and included a section through the borough. This swathe of World War II defences consists of pillboxes (concrete defensive bunkers often hexagonal in shape) and the fortified natural defences of the rivers Loddon, Broadwater and Blackwater (including in-built chambers for demolition charges in the local bridges).
- A2.12 The Loddon River Valley has a rural, remote character with a dominant settlement pattern of very low density scattered built features, typically traditional brick and timber framed farmsteads, mills and humpbacked bridges at crossing points of the river. Often the settlements associated with water mills, for example old Arborfield village, which was moved post 1607, are located on the adjacent higher ground of the older river terraces or clay farmland and linked to the valley floor by rural tracks and lanes. The village of Swallowfield, which has a Conservation Area, is unusual in that it occupies a site on the valley floor.
- A2.13 The traditional built features within the valley are constructed from traditional warm red brick and timber framing of the 17th and 18th century, with clay tile roofs. This is seen in the scattered farmsteads, mill buildings, bridges and village of Swallowfield. Agricultural buildings often combine the use of weatherboarding with red brick and typically have half-hipped roofs. Flint is also seen in decorative use on gate posts or on churches and in all cases attention to detail is a characteristic of the built environment. There is a range of materials present where new built development has spread onto the valley floor, for example on the edge of Shinfield.
- A2.14 There is a loose network of lanes serving this primarily agricultural landscape, with a limited number of river crossing points. The presence of post-medieval mills at a number of these and other points, e.g. Sheepbridge Mill, Sindlesham Mill, Stanford End Mill, probably reflects the locations of earlier mills.
- A2.15 The floodplain is largely inaccessible by foot apart from public footpaths at the river crossings at Salter's Bridge, Arborfield/Shinfield and Loddon Bridge, and remains a remote, agricultural landscape. There is little use of the river for pleasure craft and limited opportunity for recreation including fishing.
- A2.16 Major infrastructure crosses the valley including the A33 in the south, and the M4, A327 and the new Winnersh Relief Road and Shinfield Eastern Relief Road. The B3270 is also very busy, and lit at night. The main line railway from Reading to Waterloo crosses the valley at Loddon Bridge on the northern border of the area.

Perceptual Landscape

- A2.17 The Loddon valley floor has largely retained a tranquil and remote rural character with limited development. There are, however, views to substantial areas of built development in adjacent areas, for example the residential outskirts of Reading which have a localised impact on tranquillity.
- A2.18 Pylons are detracting features of the valley floor, prominent in views across this open landscape. From the Shinfield Eastern Relief Road and the A327 commercial and residential development is evident on the edges of Shinfield and Arborfield.
- A2.19 In Swallowfield there are views to the Swallowfield Park parkland. South of Sheepbridge views are channelled along the river itself, creating a more enclosed and secluded character.
- A2.20 In his book, 'Our River' George Dunlop Leslie RA recalls collecting foliage and dried reeds at Wargrave, which he took away with him and used to create the pictures painted of the River Loddon.
- A2.21 The critic J.C. Loudon remarked of Swallowfield Park, in 1831, that *'The situation is nearly flat, with a stream passing through it. The house is a large plain building, lately put in thorough repair; and the gardens and grounds are undergoing essential ameliorations'.*
- A2.22 The village of Swallowfield has associations with Miss Mary Russell Mitford who wrote a diary published as 'Our Village' which became a contemporary classic. In 'Our Village' she asks of the *"brimming Loddon"*:
- "Is it not a beautiful river? Rising level with its banks, so clear and smooth and peaceful, giving back the verdant landscape and the clear blue sky, and bearing on its pellucid stream the snowy water-lily, the purest of flowers, like the lady in 'Comus'".*

Valuable Landscape Attributes

- The naturalness of the meandering course of the River Loddon and wide floodplain landscape which provide a strong sense of place.
- The wooded backdrop of mature broadleaved woodland copses and natural riparian corridors including ancient woodland which provides scenic quality and a sense of place, as well as framing views across, into and out of the area.
- Important wetland features/habitats including BAP priority habitats wet woodland and floodplain grazing marsh remnants designated as LWSs, and the nationally important Stanford End Mill and River Loddon SSSI that are uncommon in the borough and provide important ecological habitats.
- Historic riverside features including medieval moated sites, old brick watermills and bridges, the registered historic parkland at Swallowfield and the GHQ Stop Line and associated Second World War features which follow the course of the rivers.
- Sparse settlement pattern of farmsteads and the village of Swallowfield, characterised by a strong local vernacular which contribute to the scenic quality of the area and impart a sense of time depth.
- Remote and rural landscape in the south of the area due to the limited access to the floodplain and absence of development on the valley floor.
- Localised areas with a strong sense of tranquillity particularly in the south, with naturalistic qualities and experience of dark skies away from roads and visual influence of large scale settlement in adjacent areas.

Landscape Condition

The meandering course of the river and the flat floodplain landscape is intact. For the most part this is a remote and rural landscape with characteristic riverside features and important wetland habitats which contribute to the overall perception of a landscape in moderate condition. However, views to adjacent large scale development and busy infrastructure corridors, particularly in the north of the area fragment the rural landscape. There are opportunities for improvement and particular enhancement to habitat interconnectivity.

Key Issues

- Effects on tree health or species composition of woodland and wet woodland as a consequence of pathogens and climate change. Climate change is also likely to result in increased seasonal variation in river flows and greater flooding which may impact riverside vegetation.
- Hedgerow loss associated with past expansion of fields and intensification of agriculture. The post and wire fencing present is less aesthetically pleasing than a robust hedgerow network would be.
- Incremental loss of species rich grassland due to increasingly intensive grassland management/conversion to arable land.
- Decline in demand for traditional countryside products leading to loss of rural features including pollarded willows on waterside pasture.
- An area of land south of the A327 has been identified as a potential site for extraction of 3.6 million tonnes of sand and gravel which will impact on the tranquillity and rural character of the area but may provide new recreational and biodiversity opportunities depending on the restoration design and management.
- Decline or decay of historic features including the parkland at Swallowfield Park and the GHQ Stop Line.
- Drainage operations associated with development and agriculture affecting river levels and wetland habitats. Climate change is also likely to result in increased seasonal variation in river flows.
- Pressure for new residential and commercial development and supporting infrastructure both inside and outside the area is continuing to push onto the floodplain and impacting landscape character and with potential for impacts on the rurality and tranquillity of the area. Potential development of a new settlement at Shinfield (Land south of M4 SDL) may affect the tranquillity and character of the river valley at Shinfield.
- There is continuing pressure for new industrial developments, sewage treatment works and commercial premises in the river valleys, often associated with the major transport corridors.
- Increasing use of road network, leading to continuous presence of background traffic noise from the M4 and other major roads across the floodplain including the extension of the Winnersh Relief Road, Shinfield Eastern Relief Road and upgrades to the B3270 and A327.
- Increasing demand for residential, commercial and agricultural large-scale buildings leading to visual intrusion of these elements, including development within the South of the M4 SDL and expansion of the Science and Innovation Park.
- This character area contains a **reservoir of 'dark skies'**, particularly to the south of the area. 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 *Loddon River Valley* the following strategy is required: to conserve and enhance the current rural character with its typical river valley components and sense of remoteness.

The key aspects to be conserved and actively managed are the natural habitats including areas of wet woodland and wet meadow. Restore or reinstate hedgerow boundaries with native species and the re-creation of permanent pasture alongside the river.

In terms of development, the aim is to conserve the sparse settlement pattern minimising influence from adjacent landscape areas.

Landscape Guidelines

- Conserve the scenic quality and naturalistic character of the river corridor and tributary streams particularly from development, intensification of land use and encroachment by scrub and secondary woodland.
- Increase the extent of native deciduous woodland, using locally occurring native species in order to create green links to other woodland habitats and to dampen extreme river flows within river catchments. Continue to promote appropriate management through natural regeneration, control of non-native species and coppicing as a management tool for neglected woodland.
- Reinstall or repair hedgerows with native species where there are opportunities to do so. There has been recent planting of new hawthorn hedgerows, and this should be encouraged and continued but with a wider diversity of species.
- 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.
- Conserve and protect the landscape pattern of mixed pasture and arable fields and encourage environmentally beneficial management. Encourage the appropriate management of grassland by grazing, particularly at Stamford End Meadows. Consider re-creation of lost wet meadows.
- Conserve, enhance and manage wetland habitats, including BAP priority habitats, particularly from development or changes in land use. The majority of this area is part of the Loddon Valley South BOA. This network of natural habitats has been identified as a target for habitat creation and restoration and positive management of lowland meadow, wet woodland and parkland. The 2003 Environment Agency biodiversity strategy for the Loddon catchment should be used.
- Maintain the prevailing hydrology and water tables to enable anaerobic conditions to preserve archaeological sites in low lying wetland areas, particularly along river corridors.
- Ensure restoration plans for gravel extraction sites are in keeping with character of the landscape and encourage opportunities for habitat creation. Resist proposals that would impact on the intactness or integrity of the landscape or change landscape character.
- Conserve the scenic value of Swallowfield and its Conservation Area and other listed buildings, moated sites, the Registered Park and Garden at Swallowfield and features associated with the GHQ Stop Line.

- Conserve the rural character of the river corridor, to protect the individual identity of settlements such as Swallowfield, and retain their sense of physical and visual separation. In particular protect the sensitive areas of open land between Earley and Winnersh.
- Maintain the rural character and sparse settlement pattern of dispersed farms through control of new development and avoiding the spread of development onto the floodplain, particularly in relation to the South of the M4 SDL.
- Enhance sense of place through careful design (including siting, massing, scale, materials and landscape – as well as sensitive lighting to retain dark skies at night) to minimise the impacts of any potential new development on valuable attributes.
- Resist proposals that introduce extensive or obtrusive elements e.g. pylons on the visually sensitive landscape.
- Use appropriate tree planting to help integrate roads, particularly in relation to the new Shinfield Eastern and Winnersh Relief Roads. Encourage retention of wooded edges and boundaries along roads and minimising fencing and other boundary structures.
- Protect the strong perceptions of tranquillity/remoteness in the landscape, including the experience of dark skies, through the management of development, ensuring development, including infrastructure, does not spread onto the floodplain and that technical solutions to noise and light pollution are used where possible











