7F: WEST WINCHESTER DOWNS

Wooded and open downland scarps are north, east or west facing (as are many associated with the main South Downs chalk ridge) and located in the Large and Small Scale Downland types only – Ashley Downs.

Mixed woodland at Farley Mount – in Dowland Mosaic Small Scale setting

Downland Mosaic large scale south of Oliver’s Battery. Note shelter belts and wood on ridge tops.

Open Downland at Pitt Down

Compton village and Down with Winchester cathedral in distance. Line of beech runs above the Itchen valley and M3.

Teg Down and Royal Winchester Golf course on the main chalk ridge, the chalk clay boundary. Large chimneys are a distinctive feature. NW Winchester suburbs are very visible.

Hursley, situated in a dry valley on the chalk clay boundary. Large chimneys are a distinctive feature.
1.0 Location and Boundaries

1.1 A very undulating downland landscape which is a continuation of the main South Downs chalk landscape. The main escarpment is less distinct than further to the east, but there is a dominant east-west main ridge in this LCA with numerous spurs and mini escarpments. The southern boundary is formed by the southern extent of the chalk where it meets the lowland clay landscape. The western and eastern boundaries are the Test and Itchen valleys.

1.2 Component County Landscape Types
Downland Mosaic Large Scale, Downland Mosaic Small Scale, Open Downland, Significant sized settlement.

1.3 Composition of Borough/District LCAs:
Test Valley BC    Winchester CC
Ashley Downs    Hursley Scarplands
Compton with Parnholt    Sparsholt Woodlands
and Michelmersh Woods.

The boundaries of this LCA correlate reasonably with the local character assessments particularly to the north and south. To the east the west the boundary reflects the definition of the adjoining Test and Itchen Valleys which are more broadly defined at the County level.

1.3 Associations with JCAs and Natural Areas:
JCA 130: Hampshire Downs
NA 78: Hampshire Downs

1.4 Townscape assessment areas:
Western suburbs of Winchester.

2.0 Key Characteristics
• A landscape of mixed downland scale, dominated by the main west – east South Downs chalk ridge, with small escarpments and dry valley spurs off this feature.
• Very undulating landscape often with far reaching views over adjoining downs and lowland landscapes, but also more visually enclosed landscapes in dry valleys and woodland.
• Substantial tracts of interconnecting ancient and semi-natural woodland blocks which are located on higher and steeper ground as small hangers to the north and west.
• Strong time-depth, including prehistoric barrows on open downland, a range of enclosure processes and drove routes reflecting historical corn-sheep farming practises.
• Valley side settlements, nucleated villages and dispersed farmsteads.
• Hung tiles are a prevalent decorative feature on buildings.

3.0 Physical Characteristics and Land Use

3.1 The broad and sweeping landform is punctuated by small steep scarps and low hills, broken spurs of the main South Downs chalk ridge which runs east to west. This is a continuation of the Lewes Nodular formation which reaches its most westerly extent at Crab Wood. The Seaford and Newhaven formations continue in a westerly direction to the Test. These formations coincide with an undulating and twisting ridgeline which includes Teg Down c160m, Crab Wood c150m, Farley Mount 178m and Parnholt wood 140m. The main ridge becomes less distinct and more broken west of Crab wood resulting in hills with dry valleys between, and branching of the chalk ridge in the form of spurs. These appear as mini scarps predominantly north, east and west facing, parallel with the spurs such as Ashley Down and Combe bottom. They are often about 40 to 50m in height with 1:4 / 1:5 slopes. The area of Open Down is associated with the Seaford formation of soft flinty chalk with no marls.

3.2 The varied topography in this area has given rise to substantially different chalk soil types and in turn different land cover patterns. The presence of clay with flint capping typically occurs on the highest land and particularly in the west but occurs less frequently in the east. The presence of clay capping has a strong association with increased woodland cover such as Parnholt and Crab Woods. The thinner clay over chalk soils on well drained undulating dip slopes support large open arable fields. The thinnest soils on the mini scarp slopes support ancient hanger and chalk downland. Agricultural quality is predominantly medium.

3.3 Arable land use is dominant overall, but the proportion of pasture is greater within the Small Scale Downland Mosaic areas, where its distribution is abundant. There are broad differences in character between the field sizes and boundaries of the different downland types. The Open Downs have a high proportion of low/missing hedges surrounding fields between 25-100+ha. The Downland Mosaic Large Scale has taller and more treed hedges, field sizes ranging from 15 to 50+ha and occasional banks and ditches. The Downland Mosaic Small Scale has more fields formed by woodland edges, typically 7-30ha in size. Hedges on banks with ditches are more frequent and field shape is very varied and often irregular, indicative of early and informal enclosure. However, there are also fields of more regular shape and pattern with straight boundaries, particularly in the northwest. There are numerous small woods, copses and game spinneys. Dowland Mosaic Large Scale is associated with the dry valley east of Kings Somborne. Woodland occurs as large blocks along some scarp slopes (e.g. Crab and Parnholt woods), and as small copses and fragmented woodland.

3.4 The chalk geology means that there is almost no naturally occurring open standing or permanently running water. Winterbournes have been recorded running from Hursley to Shawford and Littleton eastwards to just south of Headbourne Worthy (winter 2001).
4.0 Experiential/Perceptual Characteristics

4.1 The variety of topography and landcover results in varying degrees of enclosure and richness of texture: The high, open and wooded landscapes of the major chalk ridge with views over Winchester; expansive and smooth open arable fields; and the seclusion and intimacy of the downland mosaics, with their dry valleys, large woodlands, hangers and fields bounded by thick tall hedges. There are distant and long views to the landscapes beyond the Test and Itchen valleys. Ampfield wood to the south is a strong visual boundary between the character areas.

4.2 The road network is not particularly dense. B and C class roads tend to follow the bottom of dry valleys and are often winding. Lanes and minor roads are often lined with thick hedges on banks. An exception is the Winchester to Old Sarum Roman road, which follows the main chalk ridgeline and gives dramatic views over low hills and valleys in between the woodland.

4.3 The area is well served by public rights of way, particularly from the west, the Itchen Valley and Kings Somborne. There are notably few routes in the open downs and the former extent of Hursley Park. Countryside service sites at Crab Wood and Pitt Down and Monument, plus accessible woodland at Parnholt provide a good resource of public access sites. Many of the mini scarps are not classed as open access, reflecting that many are wooded or improved grassland and not unimproved downland.

4.4 The diversity of settings in this very rural downland landscape leads to a mix of tranquillity experiences. There are opportunities for prospect and refuge from ridge lines and dry valleys and thick hedge lined tracks. The area retains dark night skies typical of more remote downland, but these are affected by night time glow from development along the south coast. The hilly topography and line of Beech to the east of Compton Down lessens the spread of noise from the M3 to the east. The relatively high proportion of woodland in the small scale downland and the very visible wooded mini scarps impart a strong sense of naturalness. Apart from spread of development from Winchester up the dry valleys, the character area is free of sprawl and urban fringe land uses.

5.0 Biodiversity Character

5.1 This is an arable farming landscape with improved grasslands which are more prevalent in the south and the west than elsewhere. There are some patches of unimproved calcareous grassland and large patches of amenity grassland in the east on the peripheries of Winchester. In terms of woodland there are thin strips of broadleaved woodland, along with strips and patches of mixed woodland, mixed, broadleaved and coniferous plantations, active coppice with standards and parkland. There is a large woodland mosaic at the Farley Mount Country Park, comprising mainly mixed plantation with some broadleaved woodland and active coppice with standards. Ancient and semi-natural woodland exists throughout and there are two large plantations which represent replanted ancient woodlands.

5.2 Bere Ashley BOA covers the north and much of the west of this landscape character area, including Crab Woods SSSI, several ancient woodlands and relict downland sites which are frequently designated as SINCs.
5.3 Crab Woods SSSI and LNR lies on shallow clay-with-flints soil, and is dominated by oak standards over a hazel shrub layer, although coppicing has recently ceased. The hazel stools are large and the coppice is now 4-6m high with the largest stems about 15cm in diameter. The oldest generation of oaks has largely been creamed from the canopy within the past two decades, possibly at the time of the last coppicing, and the dominant oak generation is around 100 years old. There are occasional large crowned beech and recent intrusions of ash and birch and some oak regeneration, mainly in small clearings beneath the canopy. The woodland ground flora is a fine example of a former coppice on clay-with-flint and is widely dominated by either bluebell or dog’s mercury.

5.4 There are over 80 SINC’s within this landscape character area, mainly designated for their ancient and semi-natural woodland resource. West Wood/ Crab Wood complex is a significantly large SINC, covering 251 ha.

6.0 Historic Character

6.1 Archaeology
6.1.1 There is a spread of Mesolithic activity within this area which appears to be part of a wider association with the broad lowland belt of southern Hampshire.

6.1.2 There is evidence of Neolithic activity within this area as part of a wider distribution both in the lowland belt and in the river valleys, and includes a Neolithic site. There are no long barrows in the area and it seems likely that although this zone was exploited, it was not a settled area. It is likely, but not demonstrable, that the north-south valley corridors on either side were the focus of settlement and movement.

6.1.3 There is Bronze Age settlement associated with the open downland to the north, and the valleys to east and west. There are Bronze Age burial mounds within the character area but generally the distribution is weak south of the open downland. There is a tendency for the burial mounds to cluster on the southern edge of the open downland, and along the high ridge that overlooks the enclave of open downland at Pitt Down. Other burial mounds seem to overlook the Test and the Itchen valleys. It would appear that in general this area was being extensively rather than intensively exploited in the Bronze Age. It is possible from general assumptions, but not proven by records, that there was Bronze Age occupation on Pitt Down.

6.1.4 The area also appears to be marginal to some degree in the Iron Age. There is a range of settlement, enclosures and field systems in the large and small downland mosaic which lies to the north of the Pitt Down open downland. This suggests that the intensive land use of the open downland extended southwards into the character area during the Iron Age. There are also signs of a settlement on Pitt Down, particularly at the eastern end over looking the Itchen Valley. To the south of this there is little Iron Age evidence. with the exception of the southwest corner of the LCA, overlooking the Test.

6.1.5 The area is crossed by the Roman road between Winchester and Old Sarum. North of the Roman road there are three Roman villas, suggesting the continued evolution of the small and large mosaic downland. Surprisingly, whilst the Itchen valley is rich in Roman evidence the open down land at Pitt Down has little evidence to offer. Subsequent Saxon burials in this area may hint at continuity. There is also a cluster of villas in the small mosaic landscape north of Ampfield. It may be significant that
6.1.6 The large and small mosaic downland is an area where medieval settlement was less nucleated and more dispersed, and where significant woodland cover appears to have survived. Its status as Saxon forests may have been influential and the settlement and field patterns suggest this area was not extensively cleared until after Forest law had ceased to hold sway. The southern half fell within the Forest of Bere Ashley – which was disafforested in the 14th century.

6.2 Historic Landscape

6.2.1 The variety of landscape types is reflected in the diversity of historic landscape types. A large range of historical enclosure processes is evident in this landscape including medieval and earlier origin enclosures, medieval assarts, post medieval and later formal enclosures. The early enclosure landscape survives best between the Dowland Mosaic Small Scale in the south west and the area of more recent enclosures found within the Open Downs.

6.2.2 The earliest extant field systems spread from the south and west. The Dowland Mosaic Small Scale landscape in the south west has a strong pattern of irregular informal enclosures which are likely to have evolved from assarts. Much of the land had been enclosed by 1615. The sinuous long field arms which reached up to Pitt Down and woodland on the higher ground are quite strongly discernible in the present landscape. Between these arms the pattern of field is very irregular, with evidence of lynchets on the steep dry valley sides. Further east in the Dowland Mosaic Large Scale, the landscape is a mixture of assart and large scale irregular enclosures which evolved from deer park and post medieval estate reorganisation. Ralph Treswell’s map of Hursley and Ampfield parishes of 1588 shows the landscape to be a mix of small assarts and regular informal wavy field boundary enclosure associated with Hursley estate. The extent of woodland at the time of the OSD mapping appears to be far less than the extent today on the small scarps. However blocks of woodland like Out Wood and Out Park of Hursley have survived only as small fragments on steeper ground. There are areas of very regular grid pattern fields associated with early 19th century enclosure around Merdon, and with late 19th century enclosure on Compton Down (high ground to the southwest of Winchester).

6.2.3 To the north of the main east-west chalk ridge the pattern is slightly different. There are still the long sinuous ladder-like field boundaries which stretch from the northwest around King Somborne to former downland areas such as Ashley and Pitt Down. However, enclosure details suggest fields have been enclosed predominantly from the 16th century; the process being complete by 173826. Many of the hedges are well treed and indicated as having mature trees along their length on the 1st edition OS mapping. There are sinuous arms to the field boundaries from Winchester in the east up to downland at Sparsholt and Teg Down. There are more regular enclosures of 18th and 19th century origin than in the south of this LCA. They occur between drove routes and around settlement such as Littleton. The presence of predominantly 19th century farms and the regular field pattern point to reorganisation of older fields to create the more regular pattern evident today.
6.2.4 The Medieval Forest of Buckholt and Bere Ashley extended into this landscape. The woodland and assarts on the higher ground and north facing side of the main chalk ridge are reminders of the medieval forest landscape which probably extended over much of the character area. There has been a recent trend (late 19th and early 20th century) for replanting ancient assart wood with conifers (e.g. at Crab Wood and Farley Mount).

6.2.5 Pitt Down and Mount Down (in the Open Downs area in the centre of the LCA) remained as predominantly open downland from Saxon/Medieval times until the 19th century. There is crop mark evidence to suggest celtic field systems in this landscape extending across to Somborne Down to the north. Boundary loss of these regular enclosures from 20th century intensification is fairly substantial, resulting in the predominant classification of prairie fields. Other historic pressures on former downland have been from 20th century suburb expansion from Winchester and Littleton, and the development of two golf courses. Whilst retaining significant time depth, this area has suffered most from 20th century changes.

6.2.6 This area contains parts of deer parks at Merdon, Michelmersh and Brook (Compton). At Merdon the deer park underlies the later landscape park of Hursley Park. Lainston House is a significant park with a lime avenue possibly dating back to the seventeenth century. At Beacon Hill there is the Farleigh Mount folly (a monument to a horse) with distant views of the surrounding landscape. Nearby is Parnholt Wood which was linked to Farley House. Taylor's map of 1759 shows an elaborate design of rides through the wood with a temple at the centre.

6.3 Built Environment

6.3.1 Overall, the settlement pattern tends towards low density nucleation. The village sizes of the mid 19th century tend to be smaller than in the adjoining river valleys and at a lower density. Throughout the medieval period Church-owned manors were normally farmed in hand. There are several examples of this settlement type in this area such as Oakfield, Eldon and Lainston. Some have become subsumed by later development such as at Littleton. In some cases these may have been locations for larger medieval settlement, but from the 16th century may have been shrunk due to processes such as the removal of peasant dwellings to make landscape settings for larger houses (probably the case with Merdon). The deserted and shrunken medieval settlement distribution here, in the adjoining area of Test valley and to the south appears to be quite dense in pattern but due to a variety of causes. Linear settlement forms are also common at the periphery of the character area. The spring line settlements of Braishfield, Lower Slackstead, Hursley fall partly within the southern boundary of the character area. There are good examples of valley side settlements at Compton and Otterbourne, although both have been subject to substantial 20th century expansion. The highest settlement and farmstead density occurs within the Downland Mosaic Small Scale landscapes. Sparsholt, a piecemeal agglomerated settlement, Littleton Hursley and Braishfield all have conservation areas. The latter two cover the majority of the settlement footprint and have an extensive rural edge with strong historical landscape connections such as Hursley Park to the west of Hursley and small early field enclosures around the north and west of Littleton.

6.3.2 Farmsteads are of mixed age. The oldest farmsteads tend to be located in the Downland Mosaic Small Scale landscapes and associated with villages. There are
villages of medieval origin (often consisting of a green surrounded by early enclosures) such as at Littleton and Michelmarsh and in more isolated locations such as Eldon, Lainston and Woolley. There is a greater farmstead density in the southern landscape types adjoining the clay, and especially on the boundary where there is a source of water and different soils. Like much of the Downs corn-sheep husbandry was the predominant historical land management practice. Communal flocks were brought up to pasture on the Downs in the day and down onto the arable, open field systems at night to provide valuable manure. This practice reached a peak in the 17th and 18th. Some parishes (such as Ashley) had grazing rights in the Forest of Bere Ashley within the clay and heathy landscapes to the south. Modern and 19th century origin farmsteads are distributed at low density throughout the character area. They developed in the Open Downs and northwest of the character area, especially in areas associated with former downland and common. Post WW2, agricultural intensification and increased mechanisation has brought a trend of large metal sheds and granaries, particularly amongst larger holdings.

6.3.3 The densest area for traditional buildings is in the southern half of the character area, especially close to the boundary with the clay lowlands. Use of tiles is particularly prevalent and there are a few examples of timber framing. There are fewer brick and flint buildings here than in similar south Hampshire down landscapes to the east of the Itchen. There are a few cob examples, particularly on the Open Downs landscape, such as at Pitt. There are some locally distinctively architectural elements such as tall and decorative chimney stacks on some buildings in Hursley. Sparsholt has quite steeply pitched roofs. Historically, there were local brick supplies to the south with distinctive orangey-red bricks from Michelmersh brickworks.
EVALUATION

7.0 **Forces for Change**

1. New small scale development within and on the fringes of Winchester and Hursley
2. Farm conversion to residential farmstead enlargement.
3. Pressure for urban fringe related activities and recreational pressures on open access and country park/countryside service sites.
4. Climate change; storm and winterbourne frequency and intensity.
5. Take up of land management grant schemes.

**KEY QUALITIES AND EFFECTS OF FORCES**

7.1 **A wide variety of historic landscape types, with many surviving ancient sinuous hedge and track lines leading up to higher ground. Substantial time depth reflected in number of extant ritual/defence related sites on high ground in/or close to woodland.**

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<td>Threats:</td>
<td>The long and visible ancient sinuous field boundaries are associated with tracks and lanes that make them well used features and perhaps susceptible to widening / realignment. Cropmark presence, possibly associated with Bronze and Iron Age field systems which occur on the open downs landscape are vulnerable to damage from ploughing. A trend towards larger storage sheds and increases in farm size, with land taken from neighbouring farms and consequently field enlargement / amalgamation.</td>
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Opportunities: Emphasise the historical importance of retaining the intactness and form of these ancient tracks and lanes through transport and rights of way planning. Greater awareness of the likelihood of cropmarks associated with former open fields could be raised with land managers. Further interpretation of the historic landscape identifying ancient drove tracks, former open field systems and extent of former downland to influence local level assessments.

7.2 **A very mixed settlement pattern but overwhelmingly rural character of moderate density. Dispersed in the south, with spring line hamlets and farmsteads and a more nucleated pattern in the north. Eastern side of LCA forms setting to Winchester.**

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<td>Threats:</td>
<td>Cumulative impact of small scale development in visually prominent parts of hill top settlements and prominent farms in the more open downland areas could dramatically increase their visual presence in the landscape. Trend towards change of use and domestication of existing farmsteads and farmland to residential and employment use, with gardens, horse paddocks and car parking, especially in the southern half of the character around Hursley and west Winchester. Possible changes and increase frequency of damage by winterbournes to valley bottom settlement and steadings.</td>
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Opportunities: Local level assessments and village design statements could give the opportunity to emphasise the variety of settlement patterns and guide style and material choice. Conservation area appraisals of Littleton, Sparsholt, Hursley, Braishfield and Compton St provide basis for monitoring condition and retaining character of the most historically...
important built parts of settlement. The rural setting to Winchester is of fundamental importance to retain. When designing new or built additions promote reference to historic building guidance documents (HCC, EH and local) particularly in respect of farmsteads, and local vernacular.

### 7.3

**Predominantly an arable farmland landscape but with significant areas of semi-natural habitat including semi natural and ancient woodland, small hanger woodland and pockets of downland. Woodlands tend to be visually prominent.**

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<td>Threats:</td>
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<td>All</td>
<td>Balancing nature conservation interest of the relic downland with recreational pressures. Changes in species composition change due to climate change – particularly associated with the steep elevated relic downland sites. Crop type changes in response to climate change (particularly in more open areas such upper parts of dip slopes) could have dramatic effects on visual characteristics of the area.</td>
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<td><strong>Opportunities:</strong></td>
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<td>There are substantial ancient woodland reversion opportunities at Parnholt and Farley Mount and opportunities for connection through hedge and woodland management / creation, particularly on the main chalk ridge. Agri-environment and grant aiding is likely to continue in respect of permanent grass margins to fields. Promote take up of woodland grants schemes and HLS. Ways to ensure the continuation of the trend for recent positive change in the form of conversion of arable land back to pasture and management of chalk grassland habitat (particularly in the BOA area) could be investigated. Support BOA target habitats for conservation, habitat linking, creation and reversion opportunities for unimproved grassland, relic downland and semi natural ancient woodland.</td>
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### 7.4

**Undulating landform, dry valleys and scarps are enduring features, often set against a backdrop of woodland. There are also tranquil areas along the exposed chalk ridge which can be appreciated via a strong network of tracks and open space.**

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<td>Threats:</td>
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<td>3.4.6</td>
<td>Over formalisation of semi-natural areas to provide recreation facilities. Close proximity to large population of Winchester immediately to the east can introduce greater likelihood of conflict through misuse (e.g. fly tipping, trespassing) on local farmland and pressure for edge of town development. Proliferation of vertical structures on escarpment tops, particularly the north-south smaller scarps where there is no woodland, disrupting the sweeping lines of the landscapes. The small exposed hanger woodlands may be most susceptible to predicted increased frequency of storms - their loss could alter perceptions of the area’s wooded character.</td>
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<td><strong>Opportunities:</strong></td>
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<td>Increase draw to the area from national park designation– particularly as striking off point from settlements to the south and Butser Country park. Also increase feasibility of reducing reliance on car to access the area. Take into account and identify the main exposed ridges and downland in new development proposals and the main visual receptor sites. Local opinions could be sought on particularly valued views to help with identifying important receptor sites.</td>
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