

County map showing location of LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREA



LOCATION

This area follows the River Ver south from St Albans to its confluence with the River Colne and then into Watford past the M1.

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

A narrow river valley corridor which skirts a mosaic of settlements, parkland, farmland and both active and restored mineral workings. The modest River Ver and upper Colne occupy a meandering floodplain which is grazed by livestock at a number of locations. Riparian willow plantations line the rivers along part of the course whilst south of Park Street restored wetland mineral workings provide recreational opportunities. A number of distinctive features punctuate the river landscape, including parkland, mills and fords. The valley is visually contained by side slopes and vegetation which generally conceal the presence of the adjoining settlements. The Ver-Colne Valley walk provides good pedestrian access.



KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- well-defined linear river corridor from St Albans to Watford
- flat sinuous floodplain with ecologically important floodplain meadows
- steeper valley sides including arable conversions, golf courses and restored land
- parklands fronting river at Munden Hall and Wall Hall
- area of restored mineral workings in river floodplain
- fragmentation of linear valley form and a loss of tranquillity where crossed by the M25, M1 and A414
- sense of rural seclusion between Otterspool and Colne/Ver confluence with attractive riverside views
- visual intrusion from urban fringe development at Watford, Park Street, Colney Street and St Albans

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

- mature beech avenue at Munden
- ford crossings of river
- stands of willows
- converted mills at Moor Mill and Sopwell
- vernacular 'Three Valleys' pumping stations
- threaded river course south of Munden Hall

- Sopwell meadows (Mrs E.Anderson)

PHYSICAL INFLUENCES

Geology and soils. The floodplain comprises river alluvium covered in stoneless clayey and poorly drained soils (Fladbury 1 series). These are locally calcareous. On the valley slopes the underlying geology is a combination of plateau and river-terrace drift. The soils are well-drained flinty coarse loamy and sandy over gravels (Sonning 1 association).

Topography. The contrast between the locally steep side slopes and river floodplain are a strong characteristic of the area, e.g. north of Park Street and along Drop Lane. Elsewhere the side slopes are less marked.

Degree of slope. Valley floor falls at less than 1 in 500. Side slopes vary between 1 in 40 to 1 in 5.

Altitude range. 53m-75m along the valley floor over a length of 12km. The side slopes are generally up to 15m above the floodplain.

Hydrology. The Ver is a chalk stream which supports important grassland habitats. The Colne is more acidic with lower flows than the Ver. The river meanders within the floodplain and there are a number of threaded courses between Munden Hall and Bushey Mill. Associated wet areas within the floodplain are common and a number of tributary streams feed the watercourses from the slope. At Park Street restored wetlands create a contrasting character. Fish-spawning ponds have been created close to the M1.

Land cover and land use. The floodplain is characterised by a mix of pasture (with grazing cattle), arable conversion (between the M25 and the M1) and recreational areas. Land uses on the side slopes are a mix of arable cropping, golf courses, restored land and parkland. West of the M1 towards Watford there is a mix of pasture, semi-natural habitats and recreational uses, in significant contrast to the adjacent urban areas.

Vegetation and wildlife. The river corridor lies at the junction of the clay with flints and the London Clay natural regions and consequently provides a varied range of habitats. North of the confluence with the Colne are several important unimproved floodplain meadow grasslands, e.g. Sopwell Meadows. Sedge marsh or 'rich fen' is found with important species such as bogbean present. The natural woodland type is floodplain alder but very little remains. Small riverine plantations and linear belts are present for both cropping and amenity, with distinctive silvery-leaved willow, poplar and ash. There is a good mix in age structure of trees and most of the floodmeadows are actively managed. Hedgerows contain the wider valley along lanes or to higher ground. Hawthorn is the main species, but locally at Drop Lane this is replaced by beech, reflecting the underlying chalk. There are many mature specimen trees and copses, including beech, sycamore, sweet chestnut, cedar and oak in the parklands at Wall Hall and Munden Hall. Some parkland trees are over-mature and in decline.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

- Wall Hall Park and Pleasure Grounds were laid out in the early 19th century following the advice of Humphry Repton who provided a 'Red Book' of suggestions in 1803, including alterations to the drives and the incorporation of a former quarry.
- The area around Munden Hall is relatively intact and comprises areas of informal medieval parkland and a complete section of meadow pasture. This section of the river corridor also contains the site of several Roman villas.

Field pattern. The floodplain was historically largely open in character but has been contained by both 18th-century parliamentary enclosure and more widespread 20th-century enclosure. The field pattern is discontinuous but, where present, fields are irregular in shape and medium in size. Many boundaries are fenced, with few hedges. Some former pre-18th century sinuous field patterns on the valley slopes have now been broken down to create post-1950 prairie fields.

Transport pattern. The Roman Watling Street crosses the Ver at Frogmore/Park Street, where its straight alignment deviates around what was probably locally wet ground. Watling Street first brought pilgrims to St Albans and then many travellers over the centuries. There are few other historic routes, with only the narrow Drop Lane following the edge of the floodplain. The area is, however, crossed by a number of motorways and trunk roads, including the M1, M25 and A414. The A4008 link road into Watford from the M1 follows the river corridor. The St Pancras railway line follows to the west of the area at Park Street.

Settlements and built form. A number of mills were built along the river, e.g. at Sopwell and Park Street. These mills are now converted to offices and restaurants.

- The two principal houses in the area are almost opposite each other. On the west bank is Munden Hall, an early 19th-century mansion, and on the east bank Wall Hall, a Gothick-style castellated turreted and cemented house of 1802 built for George Thelluson, which is now part of Watford University.
- Local building materials comprise brick and clay tile with weathered timber-framed barns. This style has been utilised in the distinctive 'Three Valleys' pumping stations.

VISUAL AND SENSORY PERCEPTION

There are limited views of the river corridor from outside the area. The section from Otterspool to Colney Street has a strong visual unity and sense of rural seclusion. Parklands overlooking the floodplain add a further degree of cohesion to the area. Other sections to the north and south are more influenced by adjacent urban uses, or comprise restored land. The noise from local roads provides the major detractor in downgrading what otherwise would be a very pleasant area.

Rarity and distinctiveness. One of a number of river valleys in the county. Certain lengths are important for the flood meadows.

VISUAL IMPACT

The major roads which cross over the river corridor are significant detracting features by virtue of both the structures and the visual disturbance of the traffic. Pylons also disrupt the scenic value. West of the M1 the built edges of Watford and Bushey visually contain the area and the A4008 affects the otherwise relaxed riverine character.

ACCESSIBILITY

There are few arterial routes along the valley apart from the Ver-Colne Valley Walk, for which there are two car parks, a picnic site and riverside walks near Drop Lane. Accessibility along the walk is generally good, but locally poorly signed and maintained. Opportunities for horse riding and cycling along the valley are limited. The river is crossed by a number of fords which are passable with difficulty during high water levels. Golf courses at St Albans and Aldenham occupy parts of the valley slopes. A 'Top Golf' centre is under construction west of the M1 close to Watford.

COMMUNITY VIEWS

The western end of the Ver Colne valley is valued for some distinctive elements, including 'lovely walks by woodland and streams'. These appeal even to those who would not rank these as their preferred elements in the landscape (D).

LANDSCAPE RELATED DESIGNATIONS

Watling Chase Community Forest (most).
 SAM: moated site at Bushey Hall Farm.
 English Heritage *Register of Parks and Gardens*: Wall Hall (Grade II).

CONDITION

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: **moderate**
Impact of land-use change: **moderate**

ROBUSTNESS

Impact of landform: **prominent**
Impact of land cover: **prominent**
Impact of historic pattern: **interrupted**
Visibility from outside: **locally visible**
Sense of enclosure: **partial**
Visual unity: **coherent**
Distinctiveness/rarity: **unusual**

CONDITION	GOOD	Strengthen and reinforce	Conserve and strengthen	Safeguard and manage
	MODERATE	Improve and reinforce	Improve and conserve	Conserve and restore
	POOR	Reconstruct	Improve and restore	Restore condition to maintain character
		WEAK	MODERATE	STRONG
STRENGTH OF CHARACTER				

STRATEGY AND GUIDELINES FOR MANAGING CHANGE: IMPROVE AND CONSERVE

- support Watling Chase community forest in the realisation of its objectives
- support the traditional grazing patterns and natural seasonal flooding as a means of managing the important and sensitive floodmeadow grasslands
- control the use of artificial fertilisers and pesticides that could affect the river and meadow habitats
- promote the reversion of floodplain meadows from arable uses south of the Ver/Colne confluence
- encourage planting of small to medium-scale plantations to screen major roads (including the M1, M25), soften urban edges and emphasise the slopes and sense of seclusion along the valley floor
- restore and sensitively manage the historic hedgerow pattern and river valley field trees
- support the management of riparian willow plantations and look for opportunities to maintain a balanced age structure of plantations and individual trees
- encourage planting of floodplain alder woodland communities (NB check extent of water-borne diseases affecting alder)
- promote the establishment of buffer strips of semi-natural vegetation along all watercourses, avoiding potential conflict with recreational use
- protect river corridors and water meadows from development that would alter its character visually or environmentally, such as culverting, impact on a floodplain, loss of water meadows or storage ponds
- avoid the construction of flood management or retention features that would be difficult to integrate into the natural landscape of such areas
- promote improved access to the valley generally, and links and signing to the Ver-Colne Valley Walk in particular
- extend opportunities for access by bicycle and horse
- support the conservation and renovation of the parkland landscapes at Wall Hall and Munden House and enhance their riverside aspect
- restore and reinstate historic features in the floodplain, e.g. lily ponds at Wall Hall
- resist ploughing of grasslands within parklands and encourage reversion from arable to grassland
- promote a co-ordinated recreation, access and conservation strategy for the development and management of the area west of the M1



• River crossing, Drop Lane
(J. Billingsley)