3.2.4 WELLAND VALLEY

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The wide shallow river valley of the Welland marks the northernmost boundary of Northamptonshire from its source near Sibbertoft, to Easton on the Hill from where it passes through Stamford eastwards through the Lincolnshire Fens to the Wash. The county boundary is largely defined by the main channel of the river, and as such, significant portions of the environmental character area lie beyond the county boundary in Leicestershire and Rutland.

The Welland rises in Northamptonshire to the west of the village of Sibbertoft on the Naseby Plateau. However, the valley proper begins a short distance to the north where the juvenile river flows eastwards through broad, gently undulating lowland vale landscapes to the west of Market Harborough and then eastwards through a narrowing valley to Stamford. Here, the Wash joins the Welland and the mature river occupies an increasingly broad, flat Fenland landscape, the channel having been canalised for significant stretches through drained farmland with a rigidly geometric field pattern.

Throughout Northamptonshire, the Welland Valley is almost entirely underlain by the Charmouth Mudstone Formation. To the east of Wakerley, however, the valley extends across a succession of Lias Group and Inferior Oolite Group rocks, including the Dyrham Siltstone, Whitby Mudstone and Northampton Sand Formations. Despite the river itself being relatively narrow and gently flowing, the valley is a significant feature of the wider landscape. In Leicestershire and Rutland the valley floor is broad and defined to the north by gently sloping convex hills. To the south in Northamptonshire, prominent and sometimes steeply sloping valley sides form a striking backdrop to the floodplain. This is particularly the case in the vicinity of Sibbertoft where the Hothorpe Hills, formed from Dyrham Siltstone Formation fall steeply from the Naseby Plateau to the valley floor and between Willbarston and Easton on the Hill, where an almost continuous scarp slope, falling away from the Rockingham Forest and the Collyweston Plateau, defines the valley. The upper slopes of the valley sides offer vantage points from where dramatic panoramic views across the Welland are possible, contrasting to more intimate landscapes in the valley floor where long distance views are restricted by landform and intervening vegetation.

Hothorp Hills

The distribution of the drift deposits displays marked changes along the course of the river and influences local landform, land use and landscape character. In the vicinity of its source, to the west of Market Harborough, extensive sand and gravel river terrace deposits are evident bordering the Welland, the permeable nature of the substrate allowing arable farming to extend down the gentler valley sides into the valley floor. Further to the east, the river valley narrows and the channel is bordered by clay and silt deposits and by narrow sand and gravel terraces. Whilst arable farming continues to be important, the wetter soils of the valley floor are less suited to arable production and verdant improved pastures and rougher grasslands border the river channel. Varied agricultural land uses create a patchwork pattern with contrasting textures and colours contributing to the landscape's visual appeal.

The Welland Valley comprises a major landform feature, influencing patterns of movement and settlement. The river itself is often barely visible in its upper reaches. However, as it matures and broadens, it becomes a more prominent feature of the landscape, and from the east of Market Harborough occupies a central position within the floodplain. The river is most often discernible from the raised landform of neighbouring valley sides, however, even from within the floodplain its course can be identified by following linear belts of vegetation or locating the many bridges that cross the river.

Easton on the Hill

3.0 NORTHAMPTONSHIRE'S ENVIRONMENTAL CHARACTER

The River itself has undergone extensive modification to reduce flood risk. The once meandering course has been straightened and deepened. As a result, the floodplain is dry for much of the year, thus allowing for a greater diversity of agricultural land uses across the floodplain and the general absence of designated nature conservation sites. Indeed the landscape has seen the conversion of large areas of grassland to arable cropping, the loss of typical riverine features and destruction of characteristic wet and marshy grasslands.

Woodlands are not typical of the valley landscape, with greater concentrations being evident on the neighbouring wooded plateaux. Small woodlands, along with rough grassland, characterise a number of the steeper upper valley slopes, as at Easton on the Hill and on the Hothorpe Hills where acidic grasslands and woodlands are retained. Elsewhere, large woodlands mark the transition between the upper valley slopes and the neighbouring plateau landscape. These plateau woodlands serve to further enclose the valley and screen views to major developments such as Corby, thus maintaining the rural character of the valley. Within the valley floor, woodlands tend to be small linear belts along tributary streams or the main channel itself. A significant belt of woodland is also associated with the railway line between Corby and Harringworth.

Hedgerow trees are mainly ash, oak and field maple and, along with waterside willows, make up much of the floodplain landscape's limited tree cover. Many of the willows have been pollarded in the past. There are no wooded areas on the floodplain except for a few field corner stands of poplar.

Harringworth Viaduct

Pasture Fields towards Easton on the Hill

New Planting towards Wakerley Great Wood

Settlement is typically located at the fringes of the floodplain on rising ground on the valley sides. A number of villages are linear in form, aligned parallel to the valley slope, as at Middleton, or at right angles to it, as at Rockingham. In both cases, the villages stretch out along the principal road running through it. The valley floor is typically sparsely settled, although occasional farms are located closer to the river channel. Beyond these, occasional sewage works and bridges are the only structures on the valley floor.

Views within the valley are generally bounded by ridgelines belonging to the Laughton Hills, High Leicestershire, and the Northamptonshire plateaux. Several features stand out in the open valley landscape, notably village church steeples, the abandoned railway line which runs the length of the eastern part of the valley from north of Medbourne to Barrowden and the wooded Rockingham escarpment which is punctuated by the prominent stone structure of Rockingham Castle. The Welland Viaduct is by far the most prominent man-made landmark. The impressive brick structure dates to the late 19th century and dominates the valley to the west of Harringworth. The large cement works at Ketton is also a prominent man-made landmark feature.

Beyond the historic core of the valley villages, the principal historic landscape features that are evident comprise remnant areas of ridge and furrow on the fringes of the villages, either in the floodplain or on the sloping valley sides. Much of the valley was enclosed during the 19th century and regular geometric fields, contemporary farmsteads and road systems provide historic landscape features that are testimony to this period of rationalisation and represent the historic development of the landscape and its inherent character. Where the pattern is strong, the landscape has a well defined grain aligned to the orientation of the river. Hedgerow patterns are breaking down in places, however, and the strong geometric pattern of the landscape is being lost. More irregular patterns are also evident on sloping land between Dingley and East Carlton where pre-19th century enclosures characterise the pattern of fields.

3.0 NORTHAMPTONSHIRE'S ENVIRONMENTAL CHARACTER

Woodland on steep scarp slopes

KEY ISSUES

- Despite the river itself being relatively narrow and gently flowing, the valley is a significant feature of the wider landscape and land management should seek to preserve and enhance the visual distinctiveness of the river corridor through the wider agricultural landscape.
- At locations along the Welland, prominent and sometimes steeply sloping valley sides form a striking backdrop to the floodplain. The upper slopes of the valley sides offer vantage points from where dramatic panoramic views across the Welland are possible, contrasting with more intimate landscapes in the valley floor where long distance views are restricted by landform and vegetation. Woodland planting, new development and land management should seek to enhance differences between valley sides and valley floor.
- In some locations, large woodlands mark the transition between the upper valley slopes and the neighbouring plateau landscape. These plateau woodlands serve to further enclose the valley and screen views to major developments as at Corby, thus maintaining the rural character of the valley. Such woodlands should be protected and enhanced where possible to help maintain the rural character of the valley.
- Small woodlands, along with rough grassland, characterise a number of the steeper upper valley slopes and these distinctive habitats should be enhanced where possible.
- The distribution of varying drift deposits are displayed in marked changes in agricultural land use along the course of the river. To the west of Market Harborough, extensive sand and gravel river terrace deposits are evident bordering the Welland, which is well suited to arable farming that extends down the gentler valley sides into the valley floor. Further to the east, the river valley narrows and the channel is bordered by clay and silt deposits and by narrow sand and gravel terraces. Land use should conserve the patchwork pattern that marks variations in the underlying geology and contributes to the landscape's visual appeal.
- The river is often not possible to discern in the landscape as a consequence of its narrow form and uniformity of surrounding land uses. Management of the riparian habitats should be encouraged to enhance the visibility, quality of the riverine habitat, and create a functioning habitat corridor through the landscape.
- The River Welland itself has undergone extensive modification to reduce flood risk with the once meandering course having been straightened and deepened. As a result, the floodplain is dry for much of the year, thus allowing for a greater diversity of agricultural land uses. Future land management should seek to restore more naturalistic river channels and profiles, and create areas of permanently or seasonally wet meadow and other typical habitats.
- Hedgerow trees are mainly ash, oak and field maple along with waterside willows. Hedgerow and river side trees make up much of the floodplain landscape's limited tree cover. Many of the willows have been pollarded in the past. Land managers should be encouraged to plant river side willows and other appropriate native tree species along watercourses and hedgerows. Pollarding should be encouraged.
- Settlement is typically located at the fringes of the floodplain on rising ground on the valley sides. A number of villages are linear in form, aligned parallel to the valley slope. The valley floor is typically sparsely settled. Development should respect village morphology and relationship to the river, and significant new development should be avoided in the floodplain.
- Views from the valley floor to prominent features in the landscape such as village church steeples, the wooded Rockingham escarpment, Rockingham Castle and the Welland Viaduct should be protected. Woodland planting or development that would obscure views should be avoided.
- Principal historic landscape features such as remnant areas of ridge and furrow on the fringes of the villages and the pattern of 19th century geometric fields, contemporary farmsteads and road systems should be protected. Hedgerow patterns are breaking down in places, and threatening to erode the simple geometry of the hedgerow networks, and as such land managers should be encouraged to 'gap up' degraded hedgerows.

Drystone Walling and Footpath, Ketton