

**MONITORING LANDSCAPE CHANGE:  
AONBS AND LANDSCAPE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT  
IN THE MALVERN HILLS**

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## **Abstract**

Conceptions of landscape and its protection have changed over time. The same is true of discourses about environmental management, but seldom have the two been aligned. This paper theorises a link between these practices through reference to the landscape of the Malvern Hills. The locality was designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in October 1959 in recognition of the high scenic value of this 'upland ridge' situated within a lowland landscape setting. However, much criticism was levelled at the 'Cinderella' position of AONB designations until the 2000 Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act attempted to improve their performance at preventing landscape change. The Act formalised the need to establish AONB management plans and to monitor the effectiveness of such plans. With no established methodology for such monitoring in existence, the paper reports on an innovative attempt to monitor landscape change through a resolution of tensions between conceptions of 'scenic beauty' and the 'ecologically modern' system of Landscape Character Assessment. This done, thoughts turn to a cultural critique of these actions which raise challenges for future approaches to protecting landscape.

## **1. Theoretical Considerations**

'Landscape change' has been variously considered as an alteration to a set of objects or a perceptual process associated with the viewing and memory of a lived experience. As its central tenet, this paper presents a collection of thoughts concerning the relationship between how landscape protection has been planned in Britain and wider discourses about, and broader approaches to, environmental management. In so doing, it covers subject areas that have seldom been related. These include those pertaining to the meaning of landscape; mechanisms of landscape protection and planning for future change; and new ways of 'seeing' landscape. Hence, the paper is divided into three sections. First, there is theoretical consideration of how landscape protections and planning can be situated within environmental discourses. Second, drawing upon empirical evidence from research work in the Malvern Hills, a report is given on combining approaches from differing theoretical origins to advance present and future understanding of landscape change in a protected area; the Malvern Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Third, using insights from the 'cultural turn' in human geography, a critique is begun in order to raise into consciousness some future challenges facing those attempting to define and manage landscape change.

### ***1.1 Scenic Beauty and Selective Protectionism***

In the briefest of glosses, it is well-established that the British view of landscape evolved during the 18<sup>th</sup> century from one of fear to reverence of 'wild places'. Celia Fiennes' dismissive comments in 1698 that the Lake District was 'mostly rocks' (Brown, 2005) and Daniel Defoe's description of the Lake District in his tour of 1724-27 as 'seeing nothing around me, in many places, but impassable hills, whose tops, covered in snow, seemed to tell us that all the pleasant part of England was at an end' (Furbank *et al.*, 1991, p.292) were amongst the last iterations of such a view. This changing view of landscape can be traced through the influence of the turbulent, yet 'savage' beautiful landscapes of Salvator Rosa to the calm picturesque of Claude Lorrain, later to be picked up in Britain by William Gilpin, the Lakes romantic poets and then by Turner (Figure 1) and Constable (though the latter tried and thought mountains oppressing – see Leslie, 1951). Enhanced by such literary and artistic heavyweights, these views became increasingly entrenched, primarily as a reaction to the industrial revolution and march of technology, as depicted in Cruikshank's *March of the Bricks and Mortar* from 1829 (Figure 2). For a nation characterised as occupying a small island, against a backdrop of expanding population and urbanisation / industrialisation, a cultural norm was firmly established – one valuing and romanticising rural spaces. Over time, this has become worked and re-worked as the 'rural idyll' (Short, 1991). It is from this cultural inheritance that we can begin to understand later (20<sup>th</sup> century) valuations of landscape.

The housebuilding boom of 1930s Britain that was part of the recovery from the Great Depression reinvigorated debates about the loss of what were, by now, culturally well-loved landscapes. A point was reached where serious calls for protection were increasingly frequent and vocal. Such demands came primarily from the access to the countryside movement whose enjoyment of the outdoors not only depended upon having physical access to areas, but also on having something to look at on a day's excursion into the countryside! It is unsurprising, then, that for recreationists, *views* of landscape were very important.

Planning control in town and country was part of the new 1940s vision for postwar Britain. Nevertheless, for Government, landscape protection was dealt with from a mood of political expediency, as the Ministry of Health internal memo unearthed by Sheail (1981, p.117) demonstrates: 'the Government will be exposed to serious criticism and discredit if a purely negative reply continues to be given to the large body of opinion in favour of definite action for the preservation of the countryside. The National Parks appear to provide the best opportunity of making a gesture...'. Whilst there was debate over which areas should be selected for 'preservation', what was not questioned was that the approach itself should be *selective*. The 1935 Standing Committee on National Parks, set up to co-ordinate thinking amongst voluntary bodies and interest groups, had already declared that protection should be given to '... beautiful wilder landscape, strictly preserved in its natural aspect ...' (Evans, 1997, p.62). The 1949 National Parks and

Access to the Countryside Act codified this view and cast the mould for selective landscape protection and management based on a concept of 'scenic beauty'. The resulting sequestered landscapes that the Act enshrined are thus an intersection between the aesthetic and the cultural (Figure 3). Subsequently designated AONBs reflect this concept to the greatest extent, not having had a statutory function to cater for recreation allocated to them in the seminal 1949 legislation (Holdaway and Smart, 2001). Section 2 of the paper will return to the theme of AONBs in due course.

When reflecting upon theoretical approaches to environmental management, these actions of selective protectionism reflect something of the thesis of ecological managerialism<sup>1</sup> in which state regulatory mechanisms are used to keep change at bay. In terms of what Harvey (1996) calls the 'Standard View', it is not an 'end of use' approach in which environmental damage is fixed, but has the hallmarks of this conventional view in that first, a tragedy of the commons is prevented; second, property rights are not challenged by regulation and third, profit generation from land is not questioned or restricted (primarily agricultural use).

### ***1.2 Ecological Modernisation and Natural Areas***

Selective protectionism begins to break down when there is a shift in the mid-1980s to moving beyond the status quo and towards positive action for environmental improvement. When considering approaches to environmental management, then we can observe the increasing engagement of, at first, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and, then later, Government quangos with a discourse of ecological modernisation (Hajer, 1995). This newer characterisation of environmental politics has as its central tenet the view that prevention is better than cure to achieve a win-win environmental result (economic growth plus environmental health). This started as a discourse of 'strategic' environmental management which quite quickly evolved into one about 'sustainable' environmental management.

With the former English Nature taking the lead, it was argued that landscape (and habitat) fragmentation and degradation can only be prevented by an inclusive, rather than selective, approach to conservation. A whole landscape approach would allow justification and review of areas currently protected and provide support for ideas associated with buffer zones, making protected areas more sustainable than through the (hitherto) 'island biogeography' approach (see Diamond, 1976; Tilzey, 2000). Arguably more importantly, it would allow landscapes to survive over time 'without massive and continuous injections of money, time and technology' (Adams, 2003, p.121). To achieve this, regulation cannot be ad hoc. Instead, a future development strategy is needed (Harvey, 1996). This paradigmatic shift in thinking firmly reflects a move to the core ideas of ecological modernisation.

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<sup>1</sup> Not to be confused with 'ecological modernisation', below.

Published as a consultative strategy paper in 1993, English Nature defined 76 Natural Areas (plus 11 marine ones) on the basis of physical factors and land use. These became 92 by 1994 and were published with 'profiles' of key features and conservation objectives. But, reflecting the 'great divide' in British conservation (MacEwen and MacEwen, 1987), the former Countryside Commission proceeded to sub-divide the Natural Areas on the basis that landscapes, with which they were concerned, are more nuanced by virtue of having 'a cultural and historical dimension which will enhance the sense of place within the larger Natural Area' (Countryside Commission and English Nature, 1994, p.2). These became known as Countryside Character Areas, later being published as a national landscape typology of Joint Character Areas (JCAs), as shown in Figure 3.

In both cases, it is interesting to note that although consultation was held, it was from 'a wide range of other organisations' (Countryside Commission and English Nature, 1994, p.1) to create the end product; the *Character of England* map. In an era of bottom-up rural planning, this was a surprisingly heavy top down approach to provide a framework for the delivery of goals embedded within an ecological modernisation perspective.

### ***1.3 Landscape Character Assessment as Local Expression***

A few years prior to the development of Natural Areas, the Countryside Commission had been involved in experimental work in Warwickshire to devise a system to record landscape character. The driver was to attempt to incorporate landscape more objectively into the planning process and increase local authority awareness of the importance of landscape. Work with independent consultants gathered pace throughout the 1990s to refine techniques to define landscape character, becoming known as Landscape Character Assessment (LCA). These were applied, with some variation in precise technique, by local authorities to work up Supplementary Planning Guidance documents. For example, Worcestershire's LCA began in 1997 and was published in 1999 (Worcestershire County Council, 1999). Formal national guidance appeared in 2002 (Scottish Natural Heritage and the Countryside Agency, 2002). However, because of the evolving nature of the methodology, work at the Local Authority level has not always been congruent with the national framework that the Natural Areas initiative was supposed to provide<sup>2</sup>.

LCA involves desk work using map overlays and a field survey to define and refine Landscape Description Units (LDUs). LDUs are small, distinct, yet internally homogenous blocks of landscape with similar observed physical, biological and historical ('cultural') components. Such measurement, or 'characterisation', aims to be an objective, defensible method that avoids evaluating one landscape as 'better' or 'more beautiful' than another (Warnock and Brown, 1998a; see Figure 4). It further aims to be

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<sup>2</sup> As explained earlier, this national Natural Areas framework was itself evolving simultaneously.

'strategic', allowing the implementation of planning and conservation strategies to strengthen local landscape distinctiveness and diversity (Warnock and Brown, 1998b). The LCA process makes overt reference to (re)defining landscape as a relationship between people and place, so that improving people's quality of life is a further goal of this system (Scottish Natural Heritage & Countryside Agency, 2002). Nonetheless, in practice, it is the 'people' part of the characterisation which is most problematic. Historic characterisation goes some way to providing an underpinning to the cultural component, but contemporary information on present cultures shaping land use practices and patterns are conspicuous by their absence because this work is both resource (data) intensive and academically unfashionable (Lobley and Potter, 2004; Evans, 2009, forthcoming).

LCA has undoubtedly become popularised out of an emphasis on 'sustainable development' (Scottish Natural Heritage & Countryside Agency, 2002). It is effectively an extension of the ecological modernisation thesis in seeking environmental equity. This is distributive justice that refuses to prioritise, treating all areas the same (Harvey, 1996). Such resonance goes further in that the LCA system has become a dominant, hegemonic knowledge about landscape in which those participating local authorities hold the only valid knowledge of contemporary landscape restructuring.

## **2. Resolving approaches – LCA in the Malvern Hills AONB**

Having briefly covered some theoretical ground, the paper now turns its attention to empirical landscape research work undertaken in 2006 for the Malvern Hills AONB Partnership (Evans and Connolly, 2007). AONBs are well-known as the 'Cinderellas' of the statutory protected conservation areas in the UK due to chronic underfunding throughout their existence (Evans, 1997). With the passing of the 2000 Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act, Government finally declared a full commitment to support these areas (Countryside Agency, 2001). All designated AONBs (then numbering 41 in England and Wales) were given a statutory duty not only to produce a quinquennial management plan, but also to review its effectiveness. The former Countryside Agency issued guidance on the structure a reviewed AONB management plan should adopt, but this did not go as far as spelling out a methodology of *how* to review the management plan (Countryside Agency, 2006).

To conduct a review of effectiveness, data are needed. Hence, it became evident at an early stage that a landscape monitoring programme needed to be devised. One innovative way, not suggested in the Countryside Agency guidance, was to use existing LCA work completed by the local authorities for Herefordshire and Worcestershire as a framework for monitoring landscape change in the Malvern Hills AONB (Worcestershire County Council, 1999; Herefordshire Council, 2004). Both councils had conducted

detailed work to construct record the appearance of each LDU in their respective areas. With the building blocks defined, it was possible to reassemble them to represent specifically the landscape mosaic that is the Malvern Hills AONB. It is at this juncture that recourse has to be made to the preceding theoretical discussion.

According to officials at the former Countryside Agency, the AONB area for Malvern Hills, designated in 1959, was decided by a man in a Morris Minor car with a map, binoculars and a pen! Clearly, its designation was based predominantly on one person's perception of landscape, culturally embedded in scenic beauty. It is somewhat axiomatic that this area does not conform to the essentially quantitatively derived Malvern Hills JCA (Figure 5), the landscape character of which has been monitored between 1999 and 2003 through the Countryside Quality Counts project (Countryside Agency, 2004). At the local level, Herefordshire and Worcestershire LCAs employed slightly differing methodologies to arrive at their LDUs, but this is only a minor handicap compared with the fact that the AONB boundary cross-cuts many (74%) of the relevant LDUs they defined. Further, the local authority for Gloucestershire, covering 5.7% of the AONB land area, has not undertaken LCA. This potential latter problem has been overcome because LDUs already described in Herefordshire and Worcestershire continue across the county boundary to cover, somewhat fortuitously, all AONB land in Gloucestershire. The research work conducted in the Malvern Hills AONB aimed to resolve these tensions emanating from two philosophically different approaches to landscape management and produce a justifiable, workable monitoring system.

Using Geographical Information Systems (GIS) technology, boundary disparities evident between the local authorities' LCAs were eliminated to leave 27 individual LDUs, plus four fragments of LDUs whose generic 'landscape character type'<sup>3</sup> was already represented within the AONB boundary (Figure 6). A mathematically derived central point, or centroid, was calculated for each LDU, offering an objective location for the establishment of its fixed photographic monitoring point. Although some discretion had to be used in the field to establish the exact fixed point photographic location, dependent upon obtaining at least some 'view' of the landscape, photographs in close proximity to, or overlooking, the centroid were taken in each case. This offered representative coverage of each AONB landscape building block (the LDU), avoiding the temptation to head for immediately accessible or known (culturally biased) viewpoints. Each photograph was then analysed to produce a synopsis of landscape character and initial summary of the condition of its landscape elements. Figure 7 shows examples of the outcome achieved (for a comprehensive coverage, see Evans and Connolly, 2007<sup>4</sup>).

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<sup>3</sup> 'Landscape character type' refers to a classification of key visual characteristics to define landscape which can be used as a land management tool to allow some assessment of rarity and representativeness (Warnock, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> The Malvern Hills AONB Partnership has published an abridged outcome of this work as part of a 'State of the AONB' report, available at [www.malvernhillsaonb.org.uk/pages/publications.asp](http://www.malvernhillsaonb.org.uk/pages/publications.asp)

A benchmark has thus been created against which to assess future landscape change and the effectiveness of policies implemented to arrest and reverse that change.

### 3. A cultural critique?

The research achieved a marriage of an older conception of landscape as scenic beauty, derived from the Standard View, with a newer, ecologically modern, view of landscape as sets of measurable attributes capable of being restructured to achieve strong sustainable development (Tilzey, 2000). However, there is a third approach which requires triangulation into the future landscape management 'mix'; that of cultural interpretations of landscape. Human geographers have argued recently that it is a fundamental error to divide landscape into objective facts and layers of cultural meaning (Wylie, 2007). Instead, landscape is a culturally specific way to see or represent the world, as demonstrated by the landscape art referred to in the first part of this paper (Daniels, 1993). They argue that landscapes are culturally created domains rather than natural phenomena. LCA guidance makes overtures to this view when acknowledging that 'People's perceptions turn land into the concept of landscape' (Scottish Natural Heritage & Countryside Agency, 2002, p.2). Unfortunately, the philosophical position underlying the system cannot support this claim in reality.

In this respect, the drive to implement LCA at a local authority level is swimming against the tide of academic thinking about landscape. As Muir (1999, p.115) notes, it was some considerable time ago (1979) 'Yi-Fu Tuan wrote that: landscape ... is not to be defined by itemizing its parts. The parts are subsidiary clues to an integrated image. Landscape is such an image, a construct of the mind and of feeling'. In practice, LCA represents a field science which treats landscape as a collection of external measurable entities detached from the observer, as popularised by Hoskins (1955)<sup>5</sup>. It somewhat weakly adds back in a 'cultural' component *as an object* after physical aspects of landscapes have largely determined the extent of LDUs. Although LDUs may claim 'localness', they remain defined by 'experts' rather than people living within or experiencing landscapes – they are local, but not of locals. For example, the Shropshire county LCA was completed entirely by one council employee, albeit with input from consultants, for the purposes of methodological continuity. This is a long way from compiling landscape units from rich cultural assemblages of peoples' lived experiences. Therefore, the future challenge will be how to ensure landscape and its management are products of both expert knowledge and local cultural capital whilst working within the bounds of that most politically sustainable aspect of it, the protected area.

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<sup>5</sup> Detachment frees the observer to present their interpretation as expert (scientific) knowledge.

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Figure 1: *Morning amongst the Coniston Fells, Cumberland* by J.M.W. Turner, 1798  
[Tate Gallery, London]



Figure 2: *London Going out of Town - or - the March of the Bricks and Mortar.*  
George Cruikshank, 1829

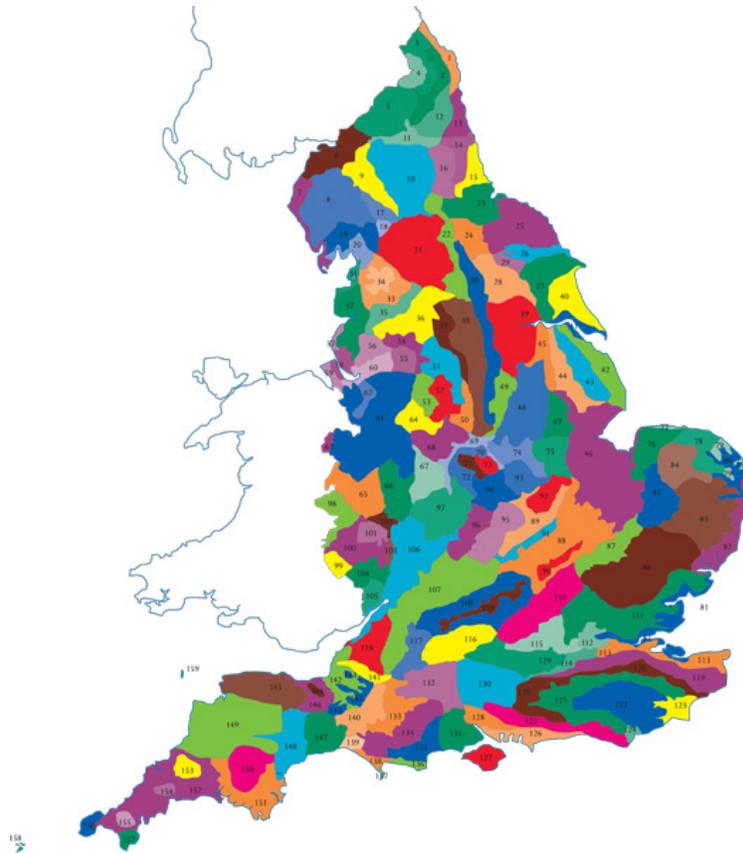


Figure 3: Joint Character Areas in England

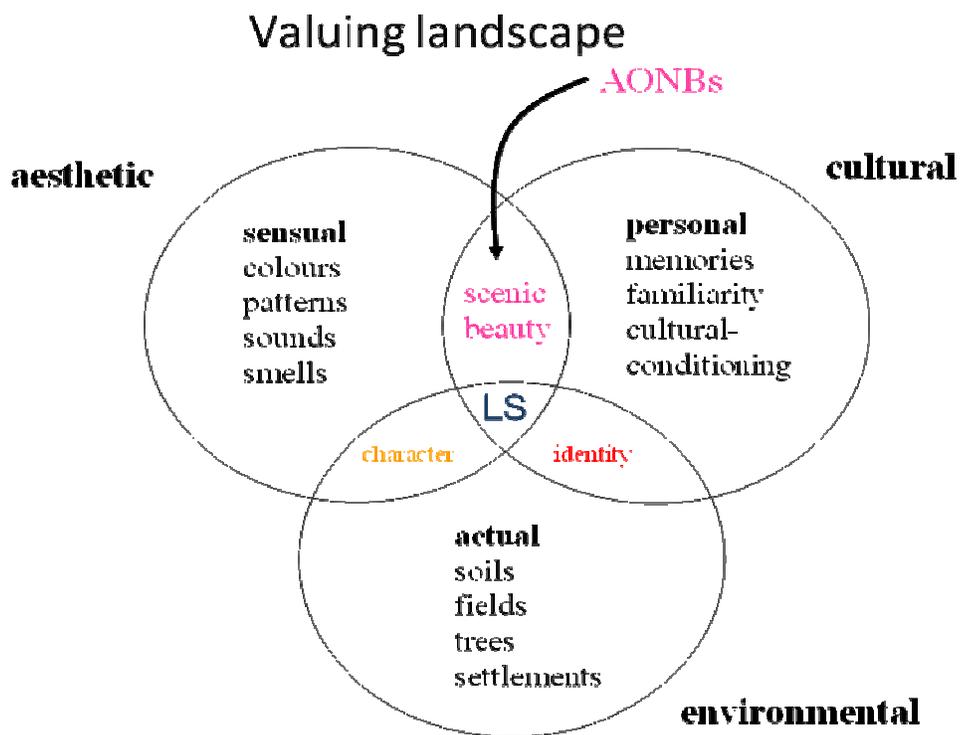


Figure 4: Separating aspects of landscape (after Warnock, 2001)

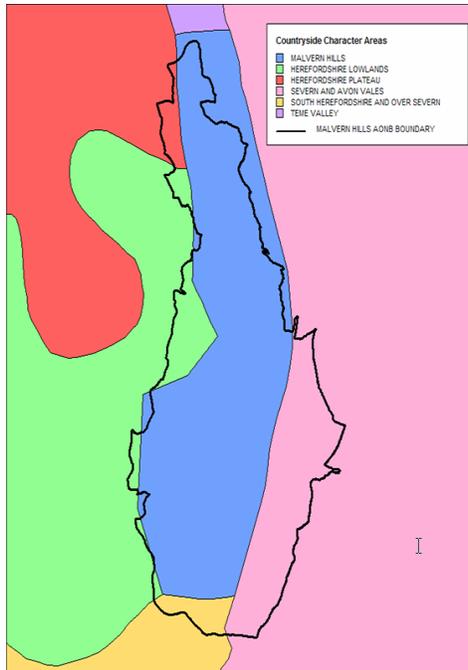


Figure 5: The congruence of the Malvern Hills JCA with the AONB (Evans and Connolly, 2007)

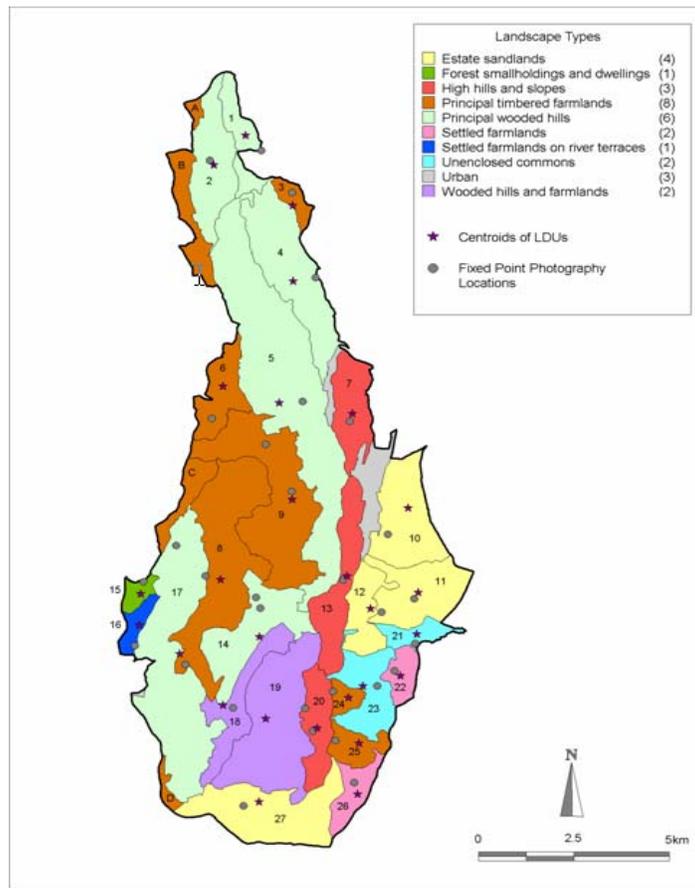


Figure 6: LDUs in the Malvern Hills AONB (Evans and Connolly, 2007)

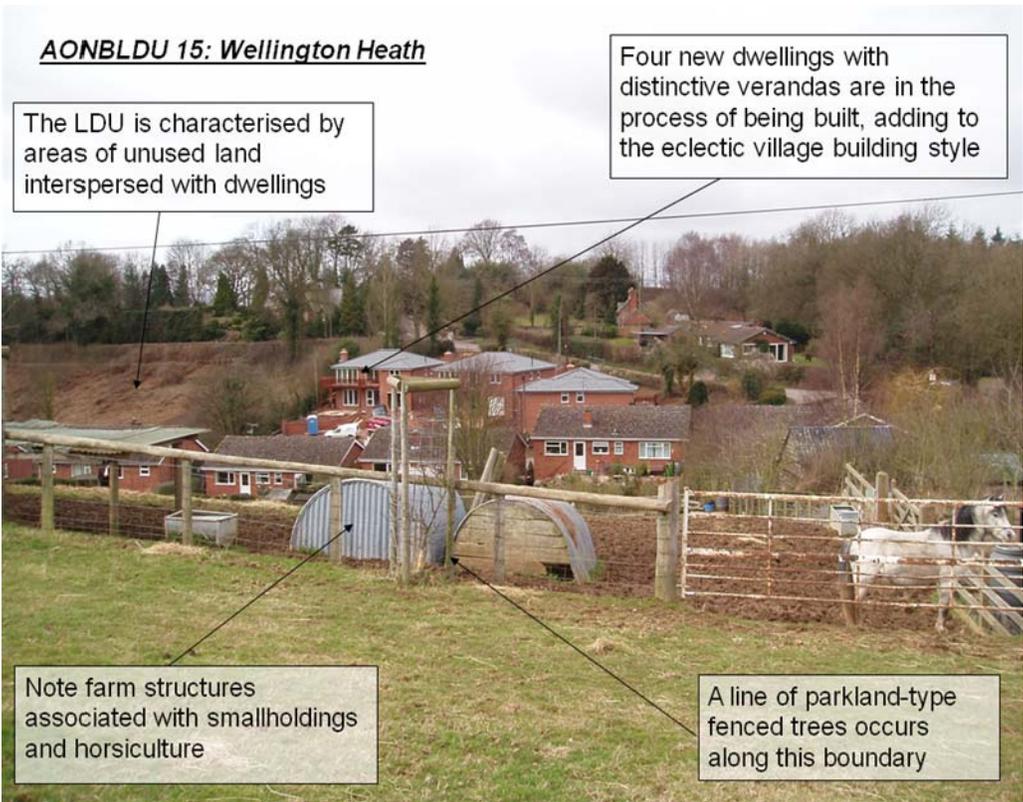
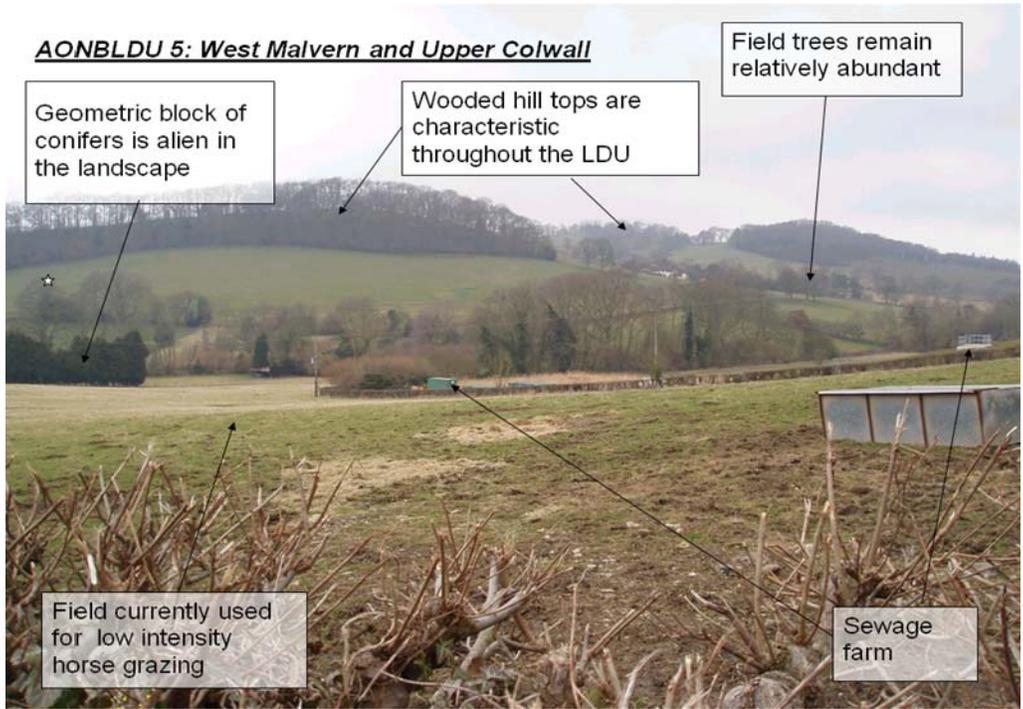


Figure 7: Establishing a fixed-point photography landscape monitoring programme for LDUs in the Malvern Hills AONB (Evans and Connolly, 2007)