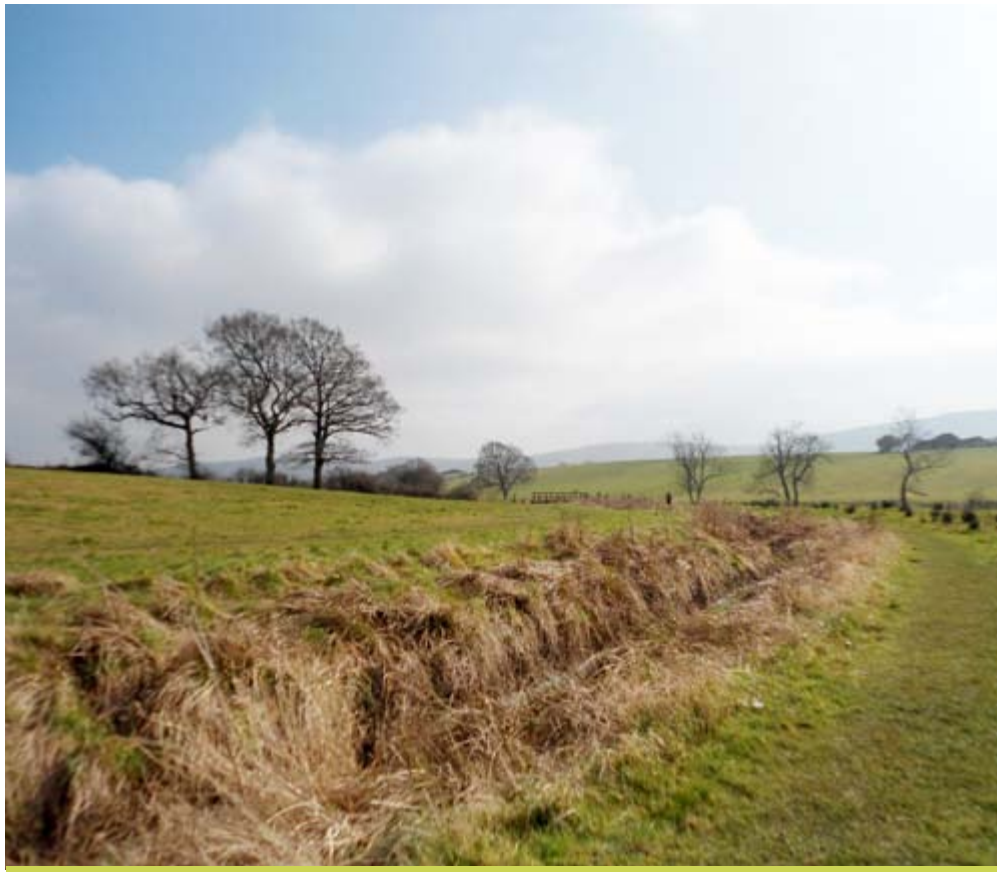
Description

Physical and functional links to other National Character Areas

The High and Low Weald form an area known from Saxon times as the Weald; they remain inextricably linked. The Low Weald is a broad, low-lying clay vale which largely wraps around the northern, western and southern edges of the High Weald National Character Area (NCA) in a rough horseshoe shape. In the far east, its northern tip ends at a sandstone cliff which marks the boundary of Romney Marshes NCA while the southern tip adjoins Pevensey Levels NCA. It is bounded for much of its length by the Wealden Greensand NCA in the north, crossing the counties of Kent, East and West Sussex and Surrey, and the South Downs NCA in the south. In the north-west the NCA borders the Surrey Hills. Although the wooded landscape means that views to higher ground are limited, the Low Weald is overlooked from hills in adjacent NCAs.

Networks of roads, including the M23, largely cross the area north–south along with railway lines to the South Coast, London and Gatwick Airport which provide commuting opportunities for much of the Low Weald's population. National Cycle Network Route 21 links the Low Weald to Greenwich in the north and Eastbourne in the south.

The catchments of the rivers Beult, Eden, Medway and Mole all drain from the area into the Wealden Greensand NCA, while those of the Arun, Adur, Ouse and Cuckmere drain through the South Downs to the sea along the South Coast, and the area provides essential water supplies to large parts of adjacent NCAs.



Low Weald in West Sussex with views of South Downs in the distance.

The unique geology of The Weald is shared with parts of Boulonnais and Pays de Bray in France.

Key characteristics

- Broad, low-lying, gently undulating clay vales with outcrops of limestone or sandstone providing local variation.
- The underlying geology has provided materials for industries including iron working, brick and glass making, leaving pits, lime kilns and quarries. Many of the resulting exposures are critical to our understanding of the Wealden environment.
- A generally pastoral landscape with arable farming associated with lighter soils on higher ground and areas of fruit cultivation in Kent. Land use is predominantly agricultural but with urban influences, particularly around Gatwick, Horley and Crawley.
- Field boundaries of hedgerows and shaws (remnant strips of cleared woodland) enclosing small, irregular fields and linking into small and scattered linear settlements along roadsides or centred on greens or commons. Rural lanes and tracks with wide grass verges and ditches.
- Small towns and villages are scattered among areas of woodland, permanent grassland and hedgerows on the heavy clay soils where larger 20th-century villages have grown around major transport routes.
- Frequent north–south routeways and lanes, many originating as drove roads, along which livestock were moved to downland grazing or to forests to feed on acorns.
- Small areas of heathland particularly associated with commons such as Ditchling and Chailey. Also significant historic houses often in parkland or other designed landscapes.
- The Low Weald boasts an intricate mix of woodlands, much of it ancient, including extensive broadleaved oak over hazel and hornbeam coppice, shaws, small field copses and tree groups, and lines of riparian trees along watercourses. Veteran trees are a feature of hedgerows and in fields.
- Many small rivers, streams and watercourses with associated watermeadows and wet woodland.
- Abundance of ponds, some from brick making and quarrying, and hammer and furnace ponds, legacies of the Wealden iron industry.
- Traditional rural vernacular of local brick, weatherboard and tile-hung buildings plus local use of distinctive Horsham slabs as a roofing material. Weatherboard barns are a feature. Oast houses occur in the east and use of flint is notable in the south towards the South Downs.

Bluebell wood, Low Weald.

Statements of Environmental Opportunity

SEO 1: Protect, manage and significantly enhance the area's intricate and characteristic mix of semi-natural ancient woodlands, gill woodland, shaws, small field copses, hedgerows and individual trees to reduce habitat fragmentation and benefit biodiversity, while seeking to improve and encourage access for health and wellbeing and reinforce sense of local identity.

For example by:

- Working with partners and landowners to realise the Forest District potential.
- Re-introducing appropriate and traditional woodland management techniques, preserving both fallen and standing deadwood where appropriate for biodiversity value.
- Supporting initiatives such as the West Weald Landscape Project which focuses on Chiddingfold Forest and the internationally important ancient pasture woodlands of Ebernoe Common, promoting the integrated management of the landscape for biodiversity and people.
- Working with woodland owners, land managers and the silvicultural community to develop new markets and initiatives that realise the value and potential of high-quality hardwood and local wood fuel from new and existing woodlands.
- Identifying areas where the introduction of short rotation coppice could be used to link fragmented habitats and provide a source of fuel.
- Protecting the characteristic hedgerows with standard trees which give the area much of its intimate feel, considering replacement planting where needed.
- Further expanding broadleaved woodland on steeper slopes, especially within the catchments of the Arun, Adur, Beult and Medway, with species that reduce the risk and rate of soil erosion.
- Restoring and expanding characteristic woodland shaws, interlinking with hedgerows and copses by reinstating appropriate and traditional management, to enhance landscape, cultural heritage and biodiversity, especially where this reinforces ancient field patterns, improves habitat networks and/or helps to integrate new and existing development.
- Encouraging the targeted re-introduction and sustained implementation of traditional coppice management in woodlands that have been previously coppiced or newly planted for coppice where this is appropriate.
- Considering appropriate species for new plantings to maintain landscape structure, character and biodiversity in response to the impacts of climate change.
- Protecting ancient and veteran trees in parklands, hedgerows and fields.
- Monitoring and maintaining sustainable populations of potential problem species such as deer, squirrel and wild boar.
- Monitoring and responding to new and existing threats to woodland structure from pest and diseases such as Chalara and Phytophthora. Also monitoring and controlling non-native invasive species, particularly following periods of trauma such as loss of a key species through disease.

SEO 2: Conserve and enhance the distinctive historical aspects of the Low Weald landscape, including its important geological features and sites of heritage interest, particularly those associated with Wealden iron industry, enabling access, continued research, interpretation, understanding and enjoyment of the extensive and nationally significant resources.

For example by:

- Ensuring that earth science Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Local Geological Sites are included in the planning process and that geological conservation is integral to the development process.
- Clarifying site management needs to agreed standards for Local Geological Sites using management standards similar to those for SSSI.
- Maintaining the network of important earth science sites through supporting local geo-conservation groups.
- Engaging in the planning process to maintain views of rock exposures and natural landforms that illustrate the geological context of the area and, where appropriate, improving access to cuttings, quarries and other geological features to improve understanding and enjoyment of geodiversity.
- Encouraging the wider appreciation (among the public, minerals industry, scientific community, local authorities and conservation bodies) of the importance of Low Wealden geology and its link between scenery and habitat, through education and interpretation.
- Promoting responsible fossil collecting.
- Clearing bracken and other invasive growth to prevent damage to archaeological and geological sites.
- Working with local authorities, landowners, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and interest groups to promote the unique historical assets of the Low Weald for the benefit of local communities and to boost tourism.
- Conserving and enhancing, through sustainable and sensitive new uses, the area's distinctive traditional farmsteads, including the dispersed plans which are highly characteristic of the Weald and its oasts, barns and other buildings.
- Using an understanding of the area's distinctive traditional architecture to inspire new development, including encouragement where appropriate of the use of traditional building materials, including local red brick, flint, clay tile and weatherboarding in new development and restorative work.
- Identifying and realising opportunities to enhance the setting and interpretation of heritage assets such as historic buildings and archaeological sites. Also working with local societies and interest groups to promote the appreciation and understanding of the area's historic sites and nationally important industrial heritage.
- Increasing the amount of surviving historic parkland that is protected by measures such as agri-environment schemes and historic parkland grants, and identifying smaller historic designed landscapes and seeking to preserve and enhance them where appropriate.

SEO 3: Work at a landscape scale to improve the quality, state and structure of all Wealden rivers, streams and standing waterbodies and their appropriate flood plains, taking account of water quality, water flow and hydraulic connection with the flood plain, while seeking to enhance biodiversity, historic features and recreation opportunities and reinforcing sense of place.

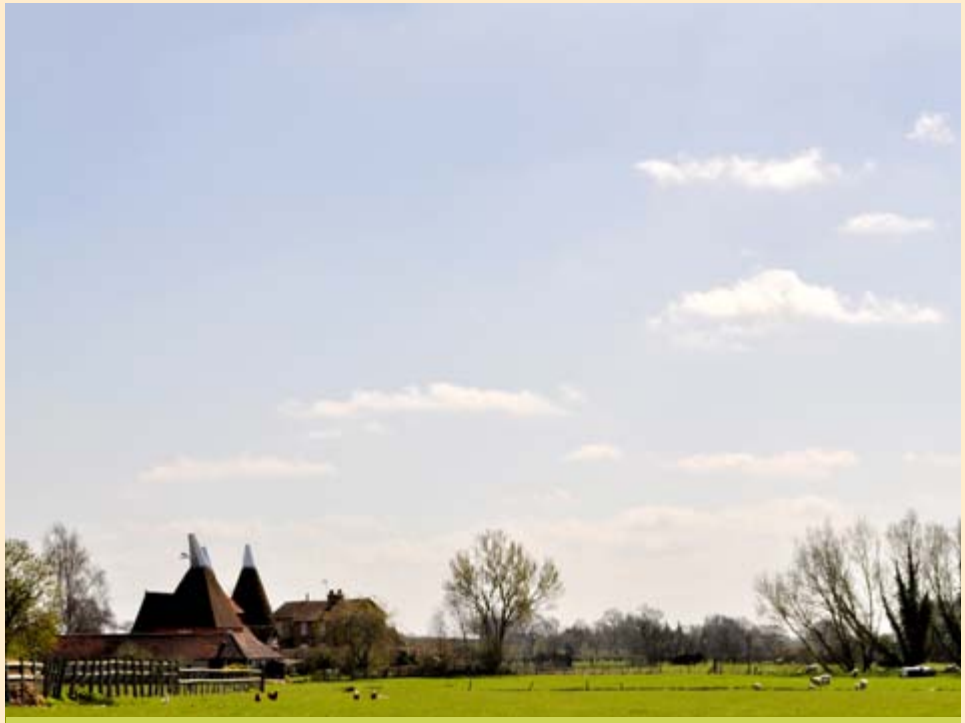
For example by:

- Working in partnership across sectors and National Character Area (NCA) boundaries to tackle the challenges associated with flood risk, pollution and low flows to safeguard surface water resources, especially those failing to meet Water Framework Directive objectives for good ecological status.
- Maintaining and restoring wetland landscapes associated with the streams and rivers, particularly the main rivers – the Arun, Adur, Beult and Medway – including maintenance and restoration of waterside pollards, lines of riparian trees, wet pasture and wet woodland.
- Identifying the requirement for research that improves our understanding of how to respond to and plan for climate change impacts and future consumer demands, and the interrelationships between supply and demand in adjoining NCAs, including the impacts of water availability on key biodiversity sites.
- Maintaining and restoring historic hammer and furnace ponds that are characteristic of the area for the benefit of wildlife and water management and inspiring sense of place. Also improving access and interpretation to increase understanding and enjoyment of these features.
- Buffering watercourses and reservoirs and restoring natural river geomorphology to improve water quality and reduce flood risk in settlements by regulating water flow.
- Drawing on best practice principles such as those established under catchment sensitive farming and building on and supporting existing stakeholder groups to help to deliver a good water environment across the Low Weald, benefiting biodiversity and local communities.
- Encouraging sustainable water use by homes and businesses supplied from catchments and promoting sustainable urban drainage systems.
- Controlling invasive non-native species, particularly along river banks, to reduce soil exposure and erosion of the bank.

SEO 4: Maintain the sustainable but productive pastoral landscape of the Low Weald, while expanding and connecting semi-natural habitats to benefit biodiversity, regulating soil and water quality by promoting good agricultural practice, and maintaining the extent and quality of unimproved permanent grassland and meadows. Restore degraded neutral grasslands to buffer sites and encourage pollinators and predators for pest regulation.

For example by:

- Supporting environmentally based agricultural grant systems; for example, whole farm plans, environmental and pollution controls, habitat creation and habitat management.
- Securing the protection of all remaining unimproved grassland as part of a working pastoral system and seeking to extend buffer zones around prime areas.
- Re-linking the fragmented landscape by restoring hedgerows and shaws and creating corridors using field margins, road verges and rivers to improve habitat connectivity, particularly where this can assist in regulating soil erosion and buffering of watercourses.
- Protecting traditional practices, including the longstanding associations of the fruit belt in Kent, maintaining a strong sense of place, for example maintaining and managing traditional orchards for heritage value, genetic diversity and local distinctiveness, including their poplar and alder shelterbelts.
- Using mechanisms such as agri-environment schemes to encourage the use of field margins, beetle banks and headlands in arable land, particularly in close proximity to food crops requiring pollination.
- Building on work to preserve surviving pockets of unimproved hay meadows through continuing to support measures such as agri-environment schemes and the Weald Meadows Initiative.[5]



Low Weald landscape with oast houses.

[5] www.highweald.org/look-after/our-projects/weald-meadows-initiative.html; www.highwealdlandscapetrust.org/weald-meadows-initiative.html

Additional opportunity:

1. Plan for the creation of high-quality blue and green space and green corridors to provide a framework for new and existing development in urban areas and along major transport routes for the enjoyment and wellbeing of communities and to enhance biodiversity.

For example by:

- Working to identify and maintain important views to elevated landforms outside the NCA such as the Wealden Greensand, the North and South Downs and the High Weald.
- Creating or safeguarding extensive areas of multifunctional green space within and surrounding towns and identified new development areas, including attractive new wetlands forming part of sustainable urban drainage systems and linking into the heart of urban areas as part of green infrastructure planning.
- Creating community allotments and potentially developing community orchards on the edges of urban areas.
- Managing and enhancing the provision and promotion of access across the area including supporting plans to extend cycle networks.
- Encouraging measures such as restoration and expansion of networks of hedgerows and shaws to minimise the effects of development and its associated infrastructure (including light, noise and air pollution) intruding on the rural character and the special qualities of adjacent protected landscapes.
- Ensuring that high-quality green infrastructure provision is integral to all development planning and encouraging improvement of the public transport network to reduce damage to rural roads and lanes.
- Promoting sustainable tourism and recreational activities to minimise impact on the environment, while helping to generate income and employment.
- Seeking to conserve areas with high levels of tranquillity and the settlement pattern of small, scattered villages and hamlets of this predominantly rural area.
- Encouraging detailed landscape assessment in advance of all significant development to identify ways of minimising impact on the rural character, the local community and the environment.