

Landscape Character

As the name denotes, this area boasts a concentration of orchards on the good quality fertile loams (Hythe beds) on the Greensand dip slope. The terrain is flat to gently undulating, with some steep narrow valleys in the area between Otham and Leeds. It consists of mixed farmland including orchards and woodland, dominated by orchards, mainly planted with modern dwarfing varieties, and shelterbelts. Small broadleaved woodlands are also present, as are shelterbelts around some arable crops (former orchards?). Some arable fields are large, but generally this is a medium-scale landscape, with occasional long views where shelterbelts allow. There is a scattering of 20th century hamlets and some isolated development, while the older villages - West and East Farleigh, Dean Street, Otham, Leeds, - have attractive centres with timber-frame and tile-hung houses. Oasts are plentiful, mainly converted and this is a balanced, peaceful landscape, despite suburbanisation along the A26 and the impact of the transport corridor and the southern edge of Maidstone along its northern boundary.

This area is generally in good condition with a strong character which has been modified by the change from traditional to dwarf orchards and the encroachment of the southern and eastern edges of Maidstone. These have a marked influence where they are visible, chiefly on the higher ground between the tributary valleys of the Len and Loose. The presence of a trout farm and a golf course within the Len valley contributes an urban edge character to what is predominantly a rural area, in contrast to the Loose Valley, which has retained a rural, timeless quality, due chiefly to the deep, narrow valley formation. The transition to the urban edge of Maidstone at the northern end of the valley is very abrupt. In general there is a very clear distinction between the urban edge and the rural area, with very little urban fringe development. In some places, as at Downwood/Willington, a suburban character has been created around a pond by the use of fencing, an intensive mowing regime and the insensitive use of hard materials around the water. A 'village green' character might have been more appropriate in blurring the urban/rural boundary.

Landscape Designations

This area is only patchily designated SLA, adjacent to Leeds Castle and to the east of Bearsted. On the easternmost edge of Maidstone, at Willington, a narrow strip of land is designated ALLI and provides the landscape setting for the village of Bearsted, as is the whole of the Loose valley, extending round the southern tip of Maidstone. Both designations act to preserve the landscape quality of these areas. Their implications for developers are discussed below.



View of Maidstone from East Farleigh



Len valley at Bearsted



Oasts in the centre of Bearsted

Physical Influences

Well-drained Cretaceous sands and loams on undulating terrain provide a good basis for extensive fruit growing, once typical of the county.

Historical and Cultural Influences

This is a rural landscape dominated by fruit growing, but with Leeds Castle on its northern boundary (mainly the farmland lies within this area) and a cluster of notable gardens and small estates around Otham. (Otham Oast House, Stoneacre, The Limes, Greenhill House are all listed in the *Kent Gardens Compendium*, together with Gore Court, Otham and West Farleigh Hall).

Gore Court lies two miles south east of Maidstone centre and consists of 16 hectares/40 acres of park and garden. Much of the ancient parkland is now arable, with a private golf course on the periphery. It contains a large timber-framed house, much altered, two large walled kitchen gardens and a series of glasshouses. The extensive Victorian ornamental gardens have largely disappeared, but a double line of dome-shaped ancient yews remains to the south of the house and the parkland boasts fine specimen beech and chestnut.

West Farleigh Hall lies on the outskirts of the village, four miles south-west of Maidstone, and consists of an early 18th century house in grounds of 3 hectares / 8 acres. The layout of the grounds is remarkably unchanged (from a 1720 engraving), with a series of gardens enclosed by walls and yew hedges, modern gardens and remnant avenue.

East Farleigh village is an extended linear village stretching from the Medway valley to the Greensand scarp. It contains many substantial Edwardian houses with extensive gardens, which gives a locally suburban character. Building types are varied: tile-hung façades, ragstone and brick, with ragstone prominent in garden walls.

Buildings and Settlement

This is an area of small villages, with Langley and Boughton Monchelsea the largest. While Langley is mainly 20th century in character, Boughton Monchelsea is very traditional, with a mix of houses of different ages clustered around a triangular green with its village sign. There are traditional orchards in the centre of the village, extensive use of ragstone, timber-frame and red brick in buildings and cross-spile timber fencing around gardens. White-painted weatherboard is distinctive by virtue of its infrequent appearance in this area.



Circular red brick oast conversion with peg-tile roof

Key Characteristics:

- good quality loams on the Greensand dip slope;
- flat to gently undulating with the notable valleys of the Len and the Loose rivers;
- mixed farming dominated by orchards and shelterbelts (often preventing extensive views), with pasture, some arable;
- attractive village centres;
- oasts, many now converted to residential use;
- deep narrow lanes with no verges;
- medium scale, quite open;
- occasional mature hedgerow oak.

Landcover and Biodiversity

Dwarf fruit orchards are the dominant land cover in this area, and their attendant shelterbelts of hazel coppice or mixed species create a small-scale, enclosed character in much of this area, although this is less apparent west of Langley and to the south of Leeds. Other land cover is arable or grassland, all hedged, with privet, hawthorn, beech or, in one instance, pure coppiced ash. Mixed hedges are more typical here, frequently festooned with old man's beard (*Clematis vitalba*) and good mature specimens of beech, chestnut and other parkland trees can be seen in this area around Gore Court and the remnants of Milgate Park and Runwood Court.



Hazel platt near Dean Street

There are few sites of nature conservation interest in this area, probably because it has traditionally been intensively farmed. The Loose Valley SNCI, tucked into a narrow, steep-sided valley between Loose village and Tovil, is a mosaic of rough grassland, pasture and hay meadow, with several large mill ponds. It lacks rare or unusual species but supports a wide variety of plants. The Len Vale Farm Pasture SNCI is similar, being a series of pastures along an almost equally narrow valley, with ancient wet alder woodland, pasture and marsh, supporting meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*), marsh marigold (*Caltha palustris*), southern marsh orchid (*Dactylorhiza praetermissa*), ramsons (*Allium ursinum*) and moschatel (*Adoxa moschatellina*).



The Loose Valley

Landscape condition

Condition

Detracting features:	few
Visual unity:	high
Cultural integrity:	high
Ecological integrity:	medium/low
Functional integrity:	high

Robustness

Pattern of elements:	strong
Consistency of pattern:	strong
Distinctive features:	orchards, oasts
Historic continuity:	strong
Impact of landform:	flat-low
Extent of tree cover:	variable
Extent of visibility:	variable

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
		ROBUSTNESS		

Landscape Guidance: conserve and strengthen

Principles

- restore and extend the existing landscape pattern of woodland, shelterbelts and hedges to visually contain the Maidstone suburbs where this is possible. Most of the edge of Maidstone in this area is residential 'tongues' along the higher land above the river valleys. Planting therefore needs to be quite dense and along the upper slopes of the valley sides if it is to be effective. Planting in the valley bottom or lower slopes should be avoided as this tends to blur the local topography;
- the Loose Valley and the land between Woolley Road and Church Road, Otham, are both designated ALLI for their contribution to the distinctiveness of Maidstone. The Borough Council will pay particular attention to the maintenance of open space and the character of the landscape, and encouragement will be given to improvements in public access. Developers are therefore advised to ensure that their proposals will not reduce in area nor detract from the character of the open space; it is suggested that proposals for public access and links to the existing footpath and cycle networks should be included in any large-scale development proposals;
- areas of nature conservation interest (SNCl)s will be protected by the Borough Council and development that would be harmful to the interest for which a site was designated will not be permitted. This could include development that would have an impact on the hydrology of these sites, for example, not just proposals within such sites.

Practical Measures

- retain traditional orchards where possible, with single or mixed species shelterbelts;
- screen views of the M20/CTRL to the north with shaws and shelterbelts, following the existing field patterns but perhaps creating shaws rather than simple hedgerows;
- where redundant agricultural buildings are to be converted to residential use, ensure that development proposals are low-key and rural in character, with an emphasis on native species hedging on boundaries to screen garden vegetation, such as hazel, hawthorn, blackthorn and field maple;
- retain/restore shelterbelts of poplar, alder or hawthorn, to maintain enclosure and screen new development;
- Appropriate species in this area would be sessile oak, beech, chestnut, ash, silver birch, hazel, field maple, privet, hawthorn and blackthorn. Scrub oak, chestnut and silver birch are a typical mix on the localised heathy soils. Pure hazel is a typical local hedge type, used for shelterbelts around orchards. However, poplar, alder and hawthorn are also used;
- use local materials, i.e. ragstone, red brick, hung-tile and pegtiles, wherever practicable and appropriate; cross-spile timber fences are a local feature as a garden boundary.

Landscape Sensitivity

This area is generally in good condition and of robust character. This is, however, diminished along its northern edge by the dominance of urban influence on the high ground and the lack of woodland. Dwarf rootstock orchards offer no screening potential. Small-scale development within the valleys would be required to be of sympathetic design, layout and materials, and to respect the existing rural character. Elsewhere, shelterbelts and hedges could be used to reinforce the landscape pattern while providing screening. Large-scale development would be difficult to integrate and might be extensively visible in some parts of this area.

Typical Planting Mixes (Area 7: Acid sands)

Although sweet chestnut is found in this area, it should only be planted in circumstances when the resultant woodland will be commercially managed. Distinction should be retained between dry woodland and that associated with the watercourses within the river valleys (see below).

Single species hedges can be used where it is important to reinforce landscape character distinctiveness. Elsewhere, mixed species hedges will contribute to biodiversity.

Woodland:

		(damper areas and valleys)	
Ash	15	Alder	25
Beech/Chestnut	40	Ash	15
Blackthorn	7.5	Field Maple	15
Field Maple	5	Osier	10
Hawthorn/Hazel	20	Pedunculate Oak	10
Pedunculate Oak	10	Sallow	15
Privet	2.5	Downy Birch	10
	100%		100%

Hedges:

Hawthorn	80
Hornbeam	10
Privet	10
	100%

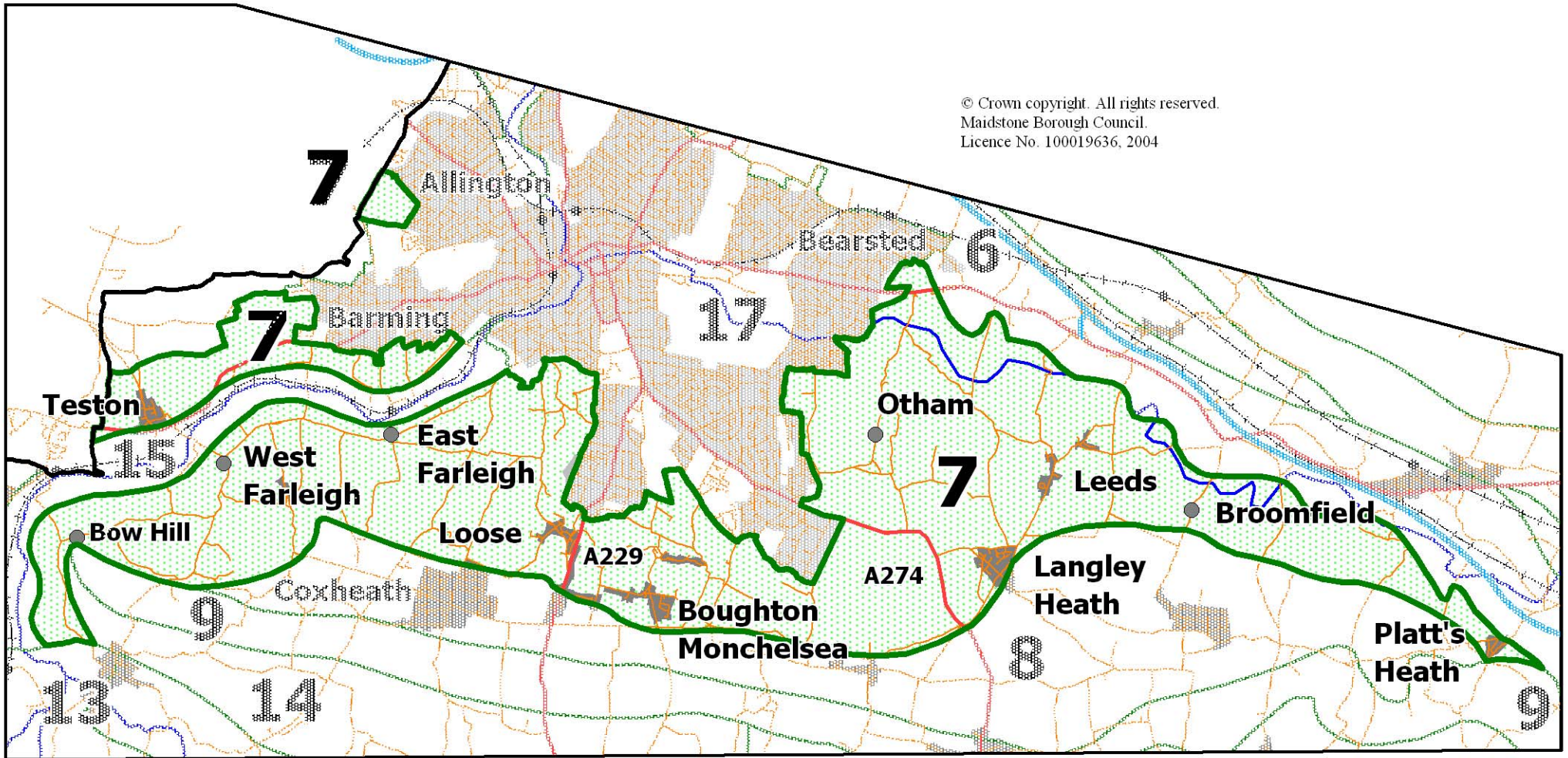
Shelterbelts:

100% alder, poplar or hawthorn

Ensure that all species are of local provenance.

Plant hedges in a double staggered row at 45cm spacings, with 30cm between the rows. See General Landscape Guidance (Part 9.1) for advice on woodland planting.

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Area 7: Greensand Fruit Belt

Scale 1:75,000