

Landscape Character

This character area echoes the form of several others in the Borough, being long and narrow, lying at a north-west to south-east angle across the landscape. Within the wide floodplain the river is often invisible, the clue to its location being the bankside vegetation of willow or alder. For much of its length it meanders through small pastures and copses, but towards its western end and the junction with the Medway at Yalding arable cultivation extends into the river corridor and it becomes rather bleak where riparian vegetation has been removed.

There is very little settlement in this area, with no villages and only occasional farms or old houses. River crossings are also infrequent, demonstrating that the original crossing points, usually marked by medieval or historic bridges, are still the only ones necessary in this unpopulated area. Around Yalding the river crossings form the focus of river-related activities such as canoeing, fishing and walking and the presence of human activity animates the landscape. On the margins of the river valley there are several oasts, reminders of the hop gardens that previously occupied the better drained soils of this area. The flat topography and the lack of tall vegetation permits extensive views of the Greensand ridge to the north.

To the south-east of Headcorn the river valley is particularly flat and bleak, although this is to some extent masked around the local airfield by tall hedges.



Yalding Lock: confluence of rivers Beult and Medway

Landscape Designations

Two small parts of this area fall within the SLA designated area, which generally applies to the area to the north and north east (Areas 10 and 14).

Physical Influence

This area consists mainly of a floodplain incised within the low-lying heavy clay of the Low Weald. It is generally open but is occasionally enclosed by tall hedgerows, especially towards the boundaries of the area. It consists of good grazing meadows, some converted to arable production with field drainage. Recreational river use has spread out from the bridging points in Yalding.



Painted brick oasts

Historical and Cultural Influences

The river Beult (pronounced Belt) first appears in Michael Drayton's *Polyolbion* (1622) and was at a time called 'the swollen one', as the river often floods the flat, low-lying grazing pasture on either bank. The area has traditionally been occupied by grazing animals rather than people, with settlement only at the river crossings - Yalding and Snarden - although somewhat overlooked by the series of country houses established on the south face of the Greensand Ridge (see Area 14: Valeside Parklands). Its finer charms have been immortalised in the pastoral poetry of Edmund Blunden, who lived at Yalding from 1900.



Medieval ragstone bridge at Yalding

Building and Settlement

The village of Yalding exhibits a variety of vernacular building styles and materials: pegtiles, black or white weatherboarding, red brick walls, tile hung façades. Cross-driven chestnut spile fencing is a feature of this area, which also contains many oasts. The few river crossings are mainly historic bridges, usually constructed of ragstone.

Landcover and Biodiversity

The main land use in this area is cattle pasture. There is some unimproved grassland, but this is a nationally scarce resource and is not extensive here. The riparian vegetation is variable: where pasture extends to the river margins, typical riparian vegetation can be found, including willow and

Key Characteristics:

- Incised, generally well-vegetated river channel surrounded by very gently undulating, low-lying land;
- very open;
- rural and unspoilt;
- mixed farming, with large arable fields, small pastures and copses, some orchards;
- oasts;
- historic bridges, but the few settlements are all above the floodplain;
- small water meadows and ponds; some moated sites;
- SSSI designation from Smarden to Yalding;
- glimpsed views through dense hedgerows of large fields;
- mainly sheep pasture, but with some cattle grazing;
- recreational use of river around Yalding.

alder, but where arable production dominates, much of the riparian vegetation has been removed or consists of species that thrive on the nutrient-rich run-off from fertilised fields. Within the wider landscape, ponds are a frequent feature, often distinguished by their surrounding scrub vegetation, which forms a notable clump within the level arable fields.

Nearly 25 hectares or 15.5 miles of the course of the River Beult are designated SSSI. It is one of the few clay rivers in England to retain (over much of its length) a characteristic flora and fauna (in central England they have usually been canalised for drainage purposes). The plant species total for the river and banks, including emergent and submerged or floating plants, is nearly 100, while two nationally scarce invertebrates have also been recorded, along with many species of dragonfly and damsel fly. Common plant species include yellow and white water-lily (*Nuphar lutea* and *Nymphaea alba*), and the riparian species vary according to adjacent land use. Poaching by cattle, for example, produces conditions appropriate for a different range of species than inaccessible land, where bulrush, branched bur-reed (*Sparganium erectum*), reed canary grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*) and reed sweet-grass (*Glyceria maxima*) flourish. Kingfisher, reed warbler and reed bunting are also present.



Willow and alder along the riverbank

This area also contains several water-related SNCIs, as at Kelsham Farm Orchard, Headcorn, which consists of two traditionally-managed apple orchards set in unimproved grassland, a few shallow ponds and a stretch of the Beult. The ponds and pasture at Waterman Quarter consist of a series of excellent ponds with a diversity of aquatic and marginal species, adjacent grazing fields and ancient mixed broadleaved woodland, copses and shaws with bluebell and primrose in the understorey. The ponds and pasture along the river Sherway contain at least eight ponds and connecting shaws, green lanes and thick hedgerows, with a good variety of grasses, woodland shrubs and trees and aquatic and marginal vegetation.

Through much of this area lanes have wide verges, typically with tall, often unmanaged hedges, in which Japanese knotweed has become locally established.



Arable cultivation has entailed removal of vegetation along the riverbank

Landscape Condition

Condition

Detracting features: loss of scale
 Visual unity: very simple, occasionally bleak
 Cultural integrity: moderate
 Ecological integrity: high but modified
 Functional integrity: modified

Robustness

Pattern of elements: mixed
 Consistency of pattern: high
 Distinctive features: river
 Historic continuity: high
 Impact of landform: minimal - flat
 Extent of tree cover: limited
 Extent of visibility: extensive

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: improve and conserve

Principles

- maintain and conserve the existing variety of riparian habitats, such as cattle-grazing; resist conversion to arable and seek advice on grant aid, such as the MAFF 'Water Fringe Areas Scheme', which includes withdrawal of permanent grassland or arable from production and extensive grassland management;
- extend the principle of securing management agreements for high quality habitats;
- the SSSI designation is given for the high nature conservation value of a particular site. With the designation a list is provided of operations likely to damage the features of special interest, which in this location would include the application of pesticides; tree and woodland management; modification of the structure of the watercourse; a change in water levels; and the construction of earthworks, among others. Riparian landowners and potential developers are advised to bear these restrictions in mind and to ensure that full consultation with English Nature, as the notifying body, is undertaken before adverse changes take place or development proposals are submitted to the Borough Council;
- recreational or fishing activities could damage features of interest within the SSSI. Further development of 'honeypot' sites around bridging points requires careful design and management to facilitate recreational use without diminishing or altering the landscape character of this area;
- within riverside farmland or where footpaths provide access to the river, nature conservation interest would be enhanced by the creation of 'green corridors'. These could act as a link for animal species between the riparian vegetation and the wider landscape, providing plant and animal species which are not entirely water-dependent and which have a wider habitat range.

Practical Measures

- where possible, create buffer zones between the river and arable fields, to reduce fertiliser run-off and pesticide spray drift. These buffer zones should consist of willow, scrub and, where appropriate, water meadows. Appropriate willow species would be white and crack willow (*Salix alba* and *S. fragilis*), which could be managed as pollards, to contribute to riparian character. Suitable shrub species would be willow, grey willow, osier, alder and alder buckthorn;
- the river's clay banks should be maintained to conserve their use as nesting sites for kingfisher; thick fringes of vegetation along the river will provide cover and breeding sites for reed warbler and reed bunting. They are also suitable for the reintroduction of otter and water vole;

- tree species that contribute to the landscape character of this area include alder, willow, poplar and ash near the river, with hornbeam, pedunculate oak, field maple, Midland hawthorn, woodland hawthorn (as a tree) and wild service tree. Elm is also locally typical;
- stands of Japanese knotweed in hedges should be controlled or eradicated, to prevent the spread of this invasive alien.

Landscape Sensitivity

This landscape area lacks robustness and any ready means of mitigating the impact of development. It is therefore very sensitive, especially within the floodplain, where flood defences would be required as protection and would affect the open, flat character of this area. Outside the floodplain, small-scale development associated with existing hamlets should pay particular attention to the use of native species for boundary treatments, to ensure integration. No development that compromised the SSSI designation would be permitted, and nature conservation interest is likely to outweigh recreational considerations. Large-scale development could not be accommodated without significant damage to the character of the area.

Typical Planting Mixes (Area 11: Weald Clay / River Valley)

Although wild service tree and Midland hawthorn are found in SNCIs in this area, both are Ancient Woodland indicators and may therefore be inappropriate for new woodland plantings. Ensure that all species used are of local provenance. Black poplar is rare within the county but would be suitable for reintroduction along the Beult, in carefully chosen locations (consult EN/EA).

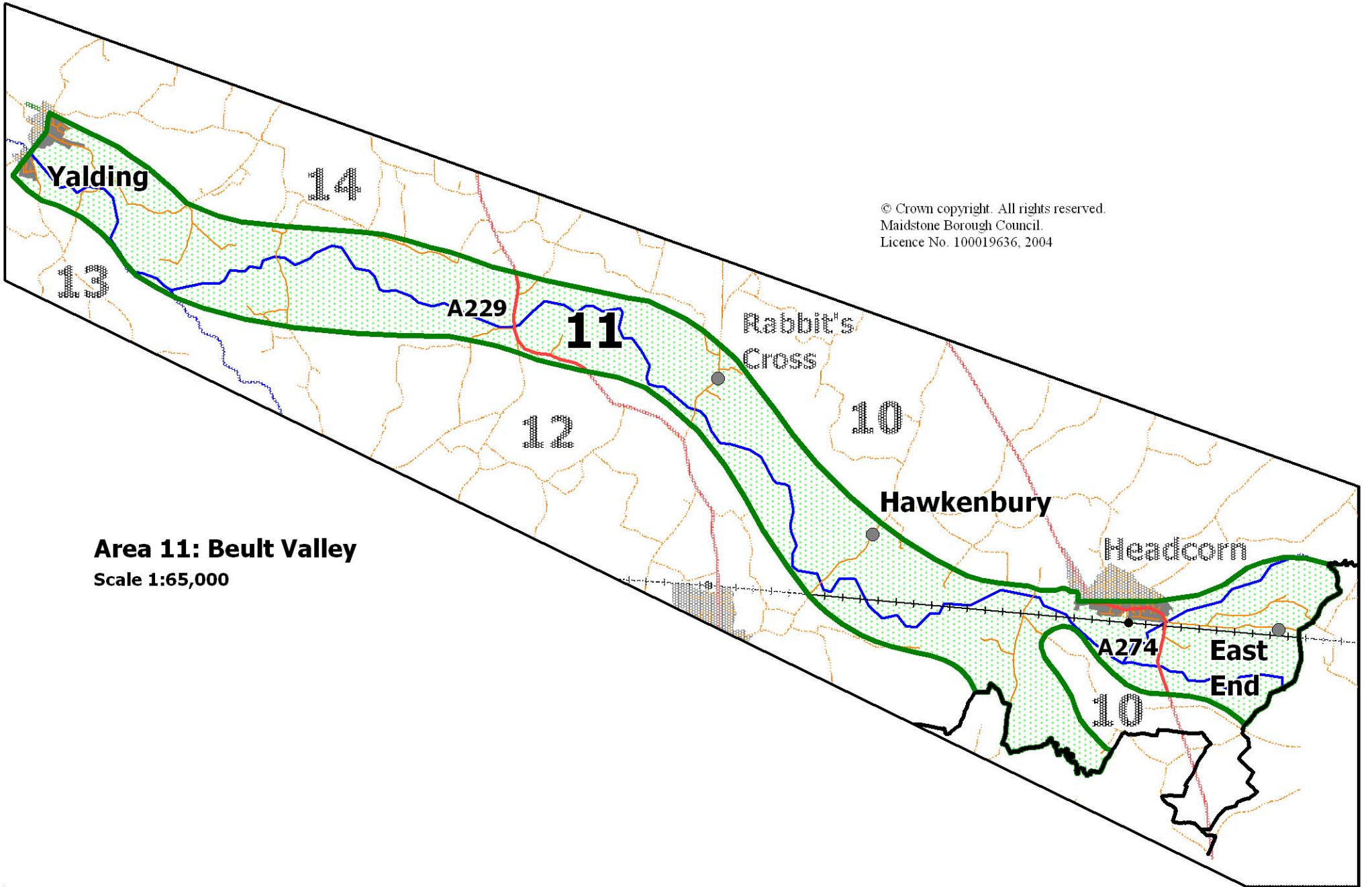
Woodland:

Alder	20	Field Maple	20
Alder Buckthorn	10	Hawthorn	15
Ash	10	Hornbeam	45
Osier	10	Pedunculate Oak	20
Sallow	10		
Willow, Crack	15		
Willow, Grey	10		
Willow, White	15		
	100%		100%

Hedges:

Field Maple	20	Field Maple	15
Hawthorn	80	Hawthorn	75
		Hornbeam	5
		Sallow	5
	100%		100%

Plant at 45cm spacings in a double staggered row, Rows to be 30cm apart



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Area 11: Beult Valley
Scale 1:65,000