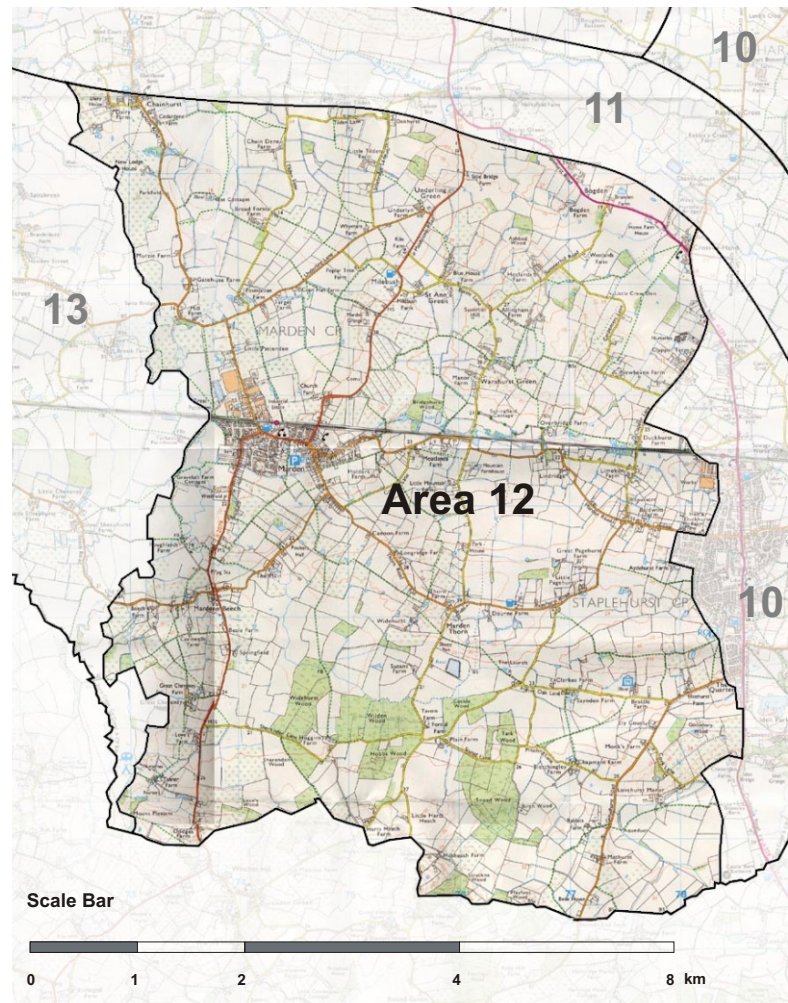


## Area 12: Low Weald Fruit Belt

## Landscape Character Areas



**Area:** South-western part of Borough, bound by river valleys of the Beult and Teise

### Landscape Character

This is a settled, remote, rather damp agricultural landscape with variation in scale depending on the extent of 20th century agricultural change. Windbreaks around the remaining orchards provide a vertical element that is lost with arable cultivation and the grubbing up of hedges. This is particularly apparent in the floodplains near the rivers, where there is no topographical variation, much more arable cultivation and many ditches. Elsewhere this is a small-scale enclosed and productive landscape, exhibiting some signs of fragmentation but generally intact.

In some places poplar or alder windbreaks, frequently taller here than in other parts of the Borough, have been replaced with conifers, which give an alien character to a traditional land use. Many oasts have been converted to domestic residences, and many meadows to paddocks. Although timber frame and red brick are the dominant traditional vernacular building materials, some garden or church walls are constructed of ragstone. Around the edge of older settlements, 20th century development tends to add a slightly suburban character, perhaps due to the massing and scale of parcels of development, which have paid no heed to traditional village layout or building style.



Winding lane with derelict poplar shelterbelt around arable field

## Area 12: Low Weald Fruit Belt

## Landscape Character Areas

### Landscape Designations

This area contains two small SLA designated areas. One lies to the south-east of Staplehurst, and shares some of the characteristics of the Southern Mixed Pasturelands. The other lies along the southern boundary of the Borough, within the High Weald fringe, where small woodland copses and rising ground provide a more enclosed and smaller-scale character. This area fringes the High Weald AONB to the south, but is still characteristic of the Low Weald, despite the slight change in topography.

### Physical Influence

This area is set within the Low Weald clay belt, on free-draining river brickearths and variable river terrace drift, with alluvium in the river valleys. The middle reaches of the river valleys create a slight incision, without being significant landscape features. The productive soils have long supported extensive orchards, although the 20th century has brought a change from traditional to dwarf rootstocks or arable cultivation and consequent change in landscape character.



Red brick oasts

### Historical and Cultural Influences

This farmland formerly consisted of hop gardens and traditional orchards, with groups of oasts, generally positioned near a pond as a precaution against fire. Now the hop gardens are gone, the traditional orchards have been converted to either modern dwarf stock or arable cropping and the oasts have been converted to residential use or storage. Moated manor sites, such as Lovehurst Manor, Staplehurst, are a feature of this area. Many are of medieval origin.

Hush Heath Manor, on the boundary of the Borough near Staplehurst, has formal 20th century gardens around a 16th century house, considerably restored in the mid 20th century. They contain two fountains, a bog garden and outstanding clipped yews - parallel lines of clipped cones, a semi-circular yew hedge and a circular battlemented yew arena.

### Key Characteristics:

- flat or gently undulating, small-scale, enclosed landscape;
- predominantly dwarf fruit trees and extensive open arable fields, with hops and pasture locally;
- intermittent tall alder or poplar windbreaks, replaced in part by conifers;
- many ponds and some moated sites;
- winding lanes with wide verges and ditches;
- small copses of oak standards with coppice and bluebells;
- groups of oasts and scattered hamlets;
- the 20th century extension of villages lends a slightly suburban character to parts of this area.

## Buildings and Settlement

Staplehurst and Marden are the only two settlements of significant size in this area. The former is the largest settlement in the Borough outside Maidstone, with a significant fringe of 20th century residential development around an older core of often timber-framed houses, many of which now have hang-tile or weatherboarded facades. The town has spread along the A229 in a process of suburban ribbon development. Marden has a rather untidy aspect around its periphery, belying the timber-framed and red brick unity of its core. There are few other settlements in this area, rather a dispersed pattern of individual farmsteads, small hamlets and oasts, the latter mainly converted to domestic use.

## Landcover and Biodiversity

This is an area of mixed farming, with many orchards and some grassland among the arable fields. The field pattern is of regular or irregular small fields, with slightly larger fields towards the southern boundary of the Borough. Around many of the orchards the traditional tall shelterbelts or rather lower hedges create an intimate, small-scale landscape, which is lost where hedges have been grubbed out for arable cultivation. The replacement of traditional species, such as poplar and alder, with conifers creates a darker element which is unchanging through seasons.

This area is important for the diversity of the flora found around its innumerable ponds, and contains one SSSI and several SNCIs. The Marden Meadows SSSI is one of the best examples of unimproved neutral grassland remaining in Kent, with several scarce species, including adder's tongue fern (*Ophioglossum vulgatum*), green-winged orchid (*Orchis morio*) and meadow saxifrage (*Saxifraga granulata*), indicating that the meadows have not been ploughed for many years. The ponds and pasture at Wanshurst Green are traditional Weald farmland, with horse-grazed pasture and many ponds, containing water horsetail (*Equisetum fluviatile*), water violet (*Hottonia palustris*) and water dropwort (*Oenanthe aquatica*). Along the railway between Marden and Staplehurst are four meadows managed for hay. They are surrounded by species-rich hedgerows with mature hedgerow oaks, adder's tongue fern and cowslips (*Primula veris*). A series of ponds, streams and willow holts near Benover contain the very rare elongated sedge (*Carex elongata*), yellow loosestrife (*Lysimachia vulgaris*), purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) and great crested newt.



Mature oaks are characteristic of this area



Meadow and woodland form a 'patchwork' landscape

**Landscape Condition**

**Condition**

Detracting features: some fragmentation of field pattern  
 Visual unity: variable  
 Cultural integrity: moderate  
 Ecological integrity: modified  
 Functional integrity: modified

**Robustness**

Pattern of elements: quite strong  
 Consistency of pattern: mainly intact - some fragmentation  
 Distinctive features: ponds, shelterbelts, orchards  
 Historic continuity: quite strong  
 Impact of landform: minimal - flat  
 Extent of tree cover: limited  
 Extent of visibility within area: open with shelterbelts

<b>CONDITION</b>	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
		<b>ROBUSTNESS</b>		

**Landscape Guidance: improve and conserve**

**Principles**

- the SSSI and SNCI designations are intended to protect the nature conservation interest of designated sites. Developers are advised that any development that could have an adverse impact on an SSSI, directly or indirectly, will not be permitted. Similarly, development harmful to an SNCI will not be permitted. Developers should be aware that development adjacent to these sites could also have an impact on their nature conservation value;
- within areas designated SLA, landscape consideration will take priority and any development proposals must pay particular attention to the scenic quality and distinctive character of the area;
- extend the principle of securing management agreements for high quality habitats;
- conserve the remaining small-scale landscape structure by maintaining and replacing hedgerows, especially around the arable fields;
- conserve roadside verges and ditches where development is likely to have an impact and resist creating a suburban character through the use of concrete paths and intrusive signage;
- restore or conserve traditional orchards and hop gardens where practicable and seek grant aid (Countryside Stewardship) and advice on development strategies to sustain fruit cultivation;
- conserve areas of species-rich unimproved or semi-improved grassland.

**Practical Measures**

- maintain a rural agricultural character around oast conversions by the careful use of traditional hard surface materials. Avoid intrusive fencing on boundaries and use native species hedges to blend with adjoining areas. Keep ornamental planting to areas which will not be visible within the wider landscape;
- manage, infill and retain poplar, alder and hazel windbreaks around orchards, resisting any further change to conifers. Elsewhere use hazel as a single-species hedge, with field maple or oak as a hedgerow tree;
- screen development around settlements by reinforcing and extending the established local landscape framework, such as poplar or alder windbreaks or small oak-standard copses;
- characteristic species for this area are pedunculate and sessile oak, ash, field maple, hazel, spindle, wild service tree and Midland hawthorn. Sallow and willow are found in damper areas and especially around ponds, occasionally with alder;
- use traditional building materials, especially peg-tiles, red brick and white-painted weatherboard. In Marden, hang-tile façades are very characteristic, while around Staplehurst a common garden boundary is cross-driven timber spile fencing.

**Landscape Sensitivity**

Although this area has experienced some minor changes this century, it is still predominantly an agricultural area, flat but generally enclosed. It is therefore very sensitive to change and lacks robustness. Large-scale development could not be accommodated without significant damage to the texture of the landscape. Maintenance of rural character and preservation of the landscape pattern would need careful consideration where smaller scale development was proposed.

This would include the appropriate detailing of paddocks and oast conversions to prevent a suburban influence appearing, the use of traditional species for windbreaks and shelterbelts and the restoration of the hedgerow pattern in intensively farmed areas. Development within the floodplain could severely affect landscape character. Within the SLA areas, landscape protection will have priority over other planning considerations.

**Typical Planting Mixes (Area 12: Weald Clay)**

Although Midland hawthorn and wild service tree may be found in this area, they are Ancient Woodland indicators and may therefore be inappropriate in a new woodland planting mix. Ensure that all species used are of a local provenance.

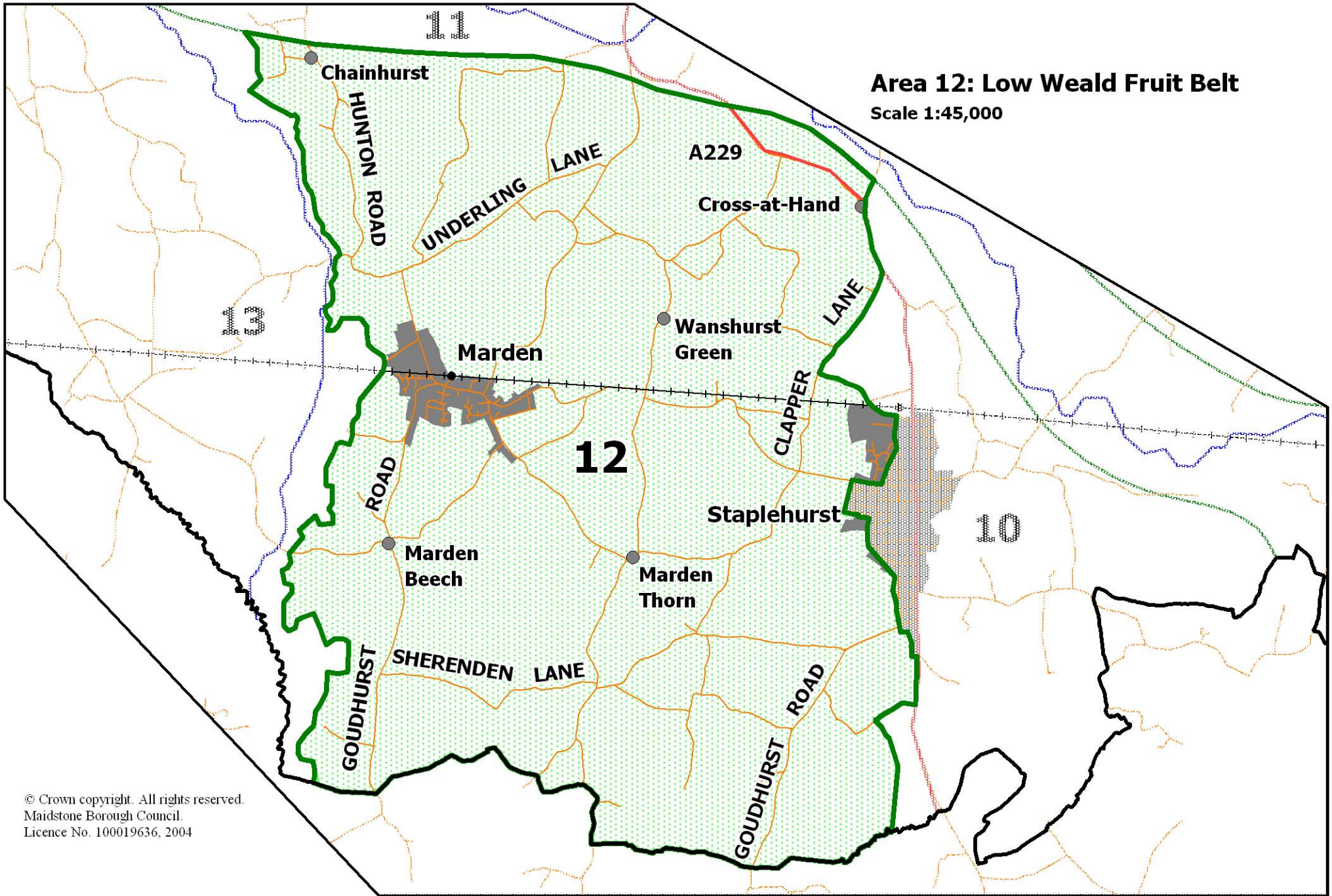
<i>Woodland:</i>			
(dry areas)		(wet areas)	
Ash	10	Alder	20
Field Maple	20	Ash	10
Hazel	35	Field Maple	10
Pedunculate Oak	30	Hazel	20
Spindle	5	Sallow	15
		Willow	25
	100%		100%

<i>Hedges:</i>		<i>Hedges:</i>		<i>Shelterbelts:</i>	
Hawthorn	15	100% Hazel		100% Alder or Poplar	
Hazel	75				
Sallow	5				
Spindle	5				
	100%				

Plant hedges in a double staggered row, 45cm between plants in row, 30cm between rows.

# Area 12: Low Weald Fruit Belt

Scale 1:45,000



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