

## Valley Meadowlands

### Key Characteristics

- Quietly-flowing rivers, fringed with vegetation, running through flat valley-floor landscapes composed of alluvium or peat
- Cattle-grazed meadows divided by a network of wet ditches, but also sizeable areas converted to arable production
- Riverside trees, including pollards
- Plantations of poplars and cricket-bat willows, with occasional alder carr woodlands
- Occasional meres and small reedbeds
- Largely unsettled, but with former watermills and occasional other buildings on the higher pieces of land.

### Location

- The Stour valley from Manningtree upstream to Great Wrating
- and in the valleys of the Stour's main tributaries:
  - The Stour Brook from Wixoe upstream to Haverhill
  - The Glem from Glensford upstream to Boxted
  - The Belchamp Brook for a short stretch on the Brundon/Borley border
  - The Box from Stoke-by-Nayland upstream to Boxford
  - The Brett from Higham upstream to Shelley

### Geology, soils, landform and drainage

The River Stour is central to this landscape character type. It rises near the hamlet of Burton End on the border of the parishes of West Wrating and West Wickham in Cambridgeshire and flows for 42 miles to the sea at Harwich. Since 1971 the flow of water in the Stour has been supplemented by water diverted from the Great Ouse at the Denver Sluices in Norfolk under the Ely Ouse-Essex Transfer Scheme. Enabled by the Ely Ouse-Essex Water Act of 1968, this was first major inter-river transfer scheme in England and through it water is diverted down the Cut-Off Channel from Denver to Feltwell, and then piped 21 miles to Kirtling Green, where it is pumped into the Kirtling Brook, which joins the Stour at Great Bradley. Part of the water is further diverted from the Stour at Wixoe to the Colne and Pant, and from Wormingford to the Abberton Reservoir, all in Essex.

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The valley of the Stour was formed by meltwaters from the retreating icesheet of the great Anglian Glaciation, about 400,000 years ago. These laid down variable mixtures of gravel, sands, silts and clays in the valley bottom. The larger tributaries are virtually all on the northern side of the valley, reflecting the main direction of flow of the meltwaters. In many places, particularly around Sudbury and the Cornards, there are distinct river terraces reflecting different episodes of meltwater activity. Depressions in these glacial drift deposits sometimes resulted in the formation of ancient meres, such as Cornard Mere and Wormingford Mere. In a few places some more recent lakes have been created by the exploitation of underlying gravel deposits, as at Flatford.

The river is first mentioned (as the *Sture*) in connection with battles at its mouth between King Alfred and a Viking fleet in AD 885. The name, which it shares with four other English rivers, is of ancient Celtic origin and probably means 'strong, powerful river'. Pronunciation varies from Stowr to Stoor.

In 1705 Parliament passed *An Act for making the River Stower navigable from the town of Manningtree, in the county of Essex, to the town of Sudbury, in the county of Suffolk*. It featured horse-drawn pairs of barges known as 'lighters' that took goods, particularly bricks, down the river and other goods back. The entire Sudbury fleet of about 20 lighters was scuttled in the Ballingdon Cut in 1914 because of invasion fears at the start of the 1<sup>st</sup> World War. The navigation never recovered and was largely disused by the 1920s, but it has an enduring fame through the depiction of its lighters and locks in the paintings of John Constable. There is also a substantial legacy of locks and weirs on the river. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War the western bank of the Stour from Bures to Long Melford formed part of the Eastern Command 'stop-line' of 1940 and was defended with a chain of pill-boxes and gun emplacements, most of which still survive as features on the river bank.

The soils of the flanking flat valley floors are mainly seasonally wet clays overlying alluvial deposits and peat.

## Archaeology

The 20<sup>th</sup>-century exploitation of the gravel-terrace deposits in the adjacent Rolling Valley Farmlands LCT have yielded important prehistoric faunal assemblages, as at Brundon, indicating the presence of mammoths, wild horses, wild cattle and bison in a temperate, but rather open grassy environment, c.230,000 to 170,000 years ago. A human presence is indicated somewhat later, perhaps around 200,000 to 70,000 years ago,

Later prehistoric human activity is more abundantly indicated by cropmarks, which are only seasonably visible and then mainly from the air. At Stratford St Mary, again near the junction with Rolling Valley Farmlands, there is an important complex of cropmarks of Neolithic date: a linear cursus monument, numerous rings and a probable long barrow, suggesting that this was an important ritual centre around 3,500 to 3,000 BC. There are cropmarks of another cursus at Bures and numerous ring-ditches indicative of flattened Bronze Age burial mounds along the Stour valley and in the Brett valley. These date mainly from c.2000 to 1700 BC and are sometimes grouped into cemeteries.

## Settlement and the built environment

Due to their wetness, these landscapes are now generally unsettled except for former watermill sites. At least 40 mills, some dating back to the time of Domesday Book, are known to have existed along the Stour and its tributaries. Most were flour mills, but some had more specialised

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uses such as fulling and paper-making. Virtually all have ceased production and have been converted to other uses, mainly domestic. The list includes Flatford Mill in East Bergholt, a brick building of 1733 made famous because of its ownership by the Constable family and its appearance in the paintings of John Constable.

There are also occasional farmsteads on the edge of the valleys or on locally higher spots. A number of medieval religious houses also occur within this landscape: Stoke College at Stoke-by-Clare and Clare Priory. The important Norman castle at Clare is similarly located, as is the Norman ringwork at Court Knoll in Nayland. There are also some significant medieval and Tudor moated sites: Parsonage Farm in Melford, Boxted Hall, Smallbridge Hall in Bures St Mary, and Shelley Hall.

Parsonage Farm, on Long Melford's western boundary, was formerly the Rectory and has the remains of a moat around it, reflecting the status of the medieval rectors. The additional possession of a *ponde yarde* with a *swann's tofte* and *two fish pondes*, and a *Dovecoate with a smal flight of Doves* doubtless added to their status.

### **Landholding and enclosure pattern**

The damp nature of the land has led to a long use as meadows. The meadows of the burgesses of Sudbury, which now form part of the Sudbury Common Lands, are actually mentioned in Domesday Book. These meadows are now used as animal pastures rather than for hay production, as is the case with most of the surviving meadows. In the upper reaches of valleys the meadows are often narrow, but in the middle and lower reaches can be broad and substantial, as in the case of Dagfen or Henny Common Meadow at Great Henny. The meadows are divided by wet ditches or dykes that may sometimes be lined by trees or scrubby hedges. Common meadows, such as Dagfen, were also formerly partitioned internally into strips – as can be seen on the 1840 tithe map of Great Henny. The introduction of more effective land drains in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has, however, resulted in the conversion of many meadows to arable land. In the wettest areas there are occasional small reedbeds.

### **Trees and woodland cover**

Historically, the agricultural value of the meadows precluded their use for woodland, except in the wettest areas where alder carrs were a more viable option. Some of the alder carrs still survive, but the decline in the value of meadows in the 20<sup>th</sup> century led to plantations, particularly of poplars and cricket-bat willows, being introduced into the valleys. The cricket-bat willow (*Salix alba* var. *caerulea*) is a particularly fine strain of the white willow that is said to have been discovered in Eriswell in NW Suffolk in 1803 and its descendants are used, as its name indicates, for the production of cricket bats. Commercial plantations of these were recognised as being of 'some importance' in the *Land Utilisation Survey* of the 1930s and are still a common feature in the broader parts of the valleys.

The edges of the rivers are studded with trees, notably willows, black poplars and alders, with some oaks and ashes in the drier spots. Native black poplars (*Populus nigra*) are now rare in the UK and the specimens on the Suffolk/Essex border are a significant proportion of the national total. Riverside willow and alder pollards are a recognised feature and are now more frequent than they were in the days of the Stour Navigation, when they would have been obstructions for the horse-drawn barges. The pollarded crack willows (*Salix fragilis*) in a popular stretch of the river between Dedham and Flatford can be seen as young specimens in photographs taken around

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1900. The working of the 'willow tops' for poles, stakes and hurdles was a local industry in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but was largely over by the early 1950s.

Some 'amenity' planting of trees in the valleys has also occurred which is out of character with the pattern, species and extent of tree cover of this landscape character type.

## **Visual experience**

Despite its size, the Stour is often almost invisible as it flows through a flat landscape, its margins camouflaged by vegetation – it is often only at bridging points that the river becomes visible. The flanking lands are more visible and often offer wonderful examples of pristine and picturesque meadows in a wider arable landscape and, if accessible (such as the meadows of the Sudbury Common Lands), they can provide an oasis of enclosure and confined views. They are often enhanced by the presence of cattle grazing. On the drier sites or where the valley is very narrow, such as in the upper Stour, arable cultivation is the dominant feature. Many of the meadows were converted to arable in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but in some places this has been replaced by set-aside, or grassland recreated with the aid of government environmental schemes.

## **Condition**

Some of these landscapes are in excellent condition, However many are affected by intakes into arable production, by horse grazing and by under grazing. The sense of tranquillity and isolation of this landscape can also be intruded upon by the development of the adjacent rolling valley landscapes which are often a focus of settlement and development.

## **Land management issues and options**

### **Geology, soils, landform and drainage**

- Protection and investigation of palaeo-environmental deposits
- Conservation of former navigation structures

### **Archaeology**

- Conservation of upstanding heritage assets
- Identify priority sites for arable reversion to protect buried heritage assets

### **Settlement and the built environment**

- Maintain and enhance the setting of the valley floor through sensitive and appropriate development control on this landscape character type and on the Rolling Valley Farmlands on the valley sides.
- Maintain the visual distinctiveness of characteristic structures such as watermills

### **Landholding and enclosure pattern**

- Maintain the historic pattern of field boundaries and ditches

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- Support the continued sensitive management of existing grass land, especially ancient meadows
- Expand the area of grassland on the valley floor

#### **Trees and woodland cover**

- Maintain the balance of tree cover on the valley floor
- Identify priorities for re-pollarding willows and to carry out this work
- Identify appropriate sites for the creation of new pollarded willow and to carry out this work

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