

Plateau Claylands

Key Characteristics

- Plateaux of heavy clay soil very gently undulating or flat dissected by small streams
- Ancient organic pattern of fields, some co-axial in the north-east
- Substantial hedges of hawthorn blackthorn and elm with oak and ash predominant hedgerow trees
- Extensive areas of hedgerow loss creating “arable prairies”
- Dispersed settlement, villages with multiple nuclei, landscape scattered with farmsteads and hamlets
- Large greens – many now enclosed but with ‘ghost’ outlines – on the flatter parts; houses around their margins, but medieval churches are only very rarely present
- Rich stock of medieval and later vernacular buildings, but generally less glamorous than those in south Suffolk
- Large modern agricultural buildings a recurrent feature
- Redundant WWII airfields
- Almost no woodland
- Small copses in villages and around farmsteads
- A working landscape on which suburbanisation is only beginning to make an impact compared with other parts of the county

Location

This landscape character type is found in two areas of the county:

- Firstly, a huge area (164 sq miles/ 425 sq km) in central north Suffolk from Great Ashfield and Walsham-le-Willows in the west to the South Elmhams and the north side of Halesworth in the east, and stretching from the edge of the Waveney valley in the north to the edges of the Gipping and Deben valleys in the south.

- Secondly, a small outlier of this landscape occurs in Gisleham and Pakefield near the east coast.

Geology, soils and landform

This landscape occurs on the great plateau of glacial till or boulder clay deposited by the retreating ice-sheet of the Anglian Glaciation. The plateau is generally flat or only gently undulating, but can be locally concave. The edges of the plateau are dissected by the valleys of the Dove, Deben, Alde and Blyth and the small tributary streams to these provide the only relatively significant relief in this landscape – as can be seen in Fressingfield and between Wilby and Worlingworth.

The soils are mainly heavy, seasonally waterlogged, clay soils of the Beccles Association, with small areas of better Ashley, Ragdale or Hanslope soils on the rising ground at the edges of the plateaux.

The small outlier of the Gisleham plateau contains the Pakefield cliffs. These cliffs have recently revealed the earliest evidence for humans in northern Europe, c.700,000 years ago. The remains were found in the Cromer Forest Bed Formation at the base of the cliffs which predates the Anglian Glaciation by more than 200,000 years.

Landholding and enclosure pattern

This landscape has an ‘ancient’ field pattern with sinuous and substantial hedges and ditches, often in ‘co-axial’ patterns – where the boundaries aggregate into long parallel lines which run at right angles to the principal water-courses. This co-axial pattern is particularly striking in the area of the South Elmhams in north-east Suffolk. These field systems probably originated in the Late Saxon or early medieval periods and a high percentage of the fields were originally used as pastures for dairy cows. This area was described by the great agricultural writer Arthur Young in c1800 as being the ‘dairying region’ of the county. In the late 18th century the introduction of clay drains, for under-field drainage, enabled the conversion of many of these pastures into more lucrative arable units. This conversion led to the rationalisation and straightening of many of the small fields to adapt them to their new use, a process that was greatly accelerated in the second half of the 20th century to facilitate and accommodate the increasingly large machines used in arable farming. The removal of hedges to amalgamate fields has weakened the earlier field patterns, leading, in some places, to the creation of very open ‘prairie’ landscapes, as at Bacton, Tannington and Linstead. Even where boundaries survive, they are often now only ditches, the hedges having been lost as their stock-retaining function disappeared.

However, a certain amount of arable farming has though, always been practised in this area and there is some evidence for former areas of subdivided common arable fields on the better-drained land. This ‘common-field’ character grows stronger towards the western edge, around Westhorpe and Crownland. Most of these common fields were enclosed piecemeal well before the Parliamentary enclosure of the 18th century and lack the strong geometric character of the late-enclosed areas further to the west.

The poorly-drained areas of the clay plateau are covered with numerous extant or former greens and commons. These range in size from the relatively small triangular greens at road junctions, such as at St Margaret's Green in South Elmham St Margaret (6 acres or 2 ha) to the huge Allwood Green (530 acres or 215 ha before it was enclosed 1804-19) which extended over parts of five parishes – Finningham, Gislingham, Rickinghall Inferior and Superior and Walsham-le-Willows. In landscape terms, the larger greens usually lie on the heaviest land with the poorest drainage and the lowest potential for arable farming. The greens seem to be the result of expansion into former marginal or 'waste' areas in the 12th or 13th centuries, and this is sometimes reflected by the green being shared by several adjacent communities, as at Allwood Green. The evidence suggests that these greens evolved through prolonged grazing from areas of woodland or wood pasture documented in Domesday Book. Allwood is recorded as *Aldewude* ('old wood') c.1220, but had become a green by 1318.

Attrition of some of the greens started early: a small green in South Elmham St Peter seems to have been enclosed by the 1320s and Whittingham Green in Fressingfield (72 a/29 ha) was partly enclosed by 1646 and fully by 1702. The greatest period of enclosure was in the 18th and 19th centuries when many of the larger greens were enclosed, such as Greshaw Green in the South Elmhams (199 a/80 ha, enclosed 1854/5) and Rumburgh Common (148 a/60 ha, enclosed 1851), but Cranley Green in Eye (118 a/48 ha) was lost as recently as the 1940s. However, some fine greens do survive, such as Chippenhall Green in Fressingfield with its wealth of green-winged orchids in May and Saxtead Green with its landmark windmill.

The enclosure of the large greens has left a very distinct landscape: very straight 'surveyors' roads run through the centres of the former greens, with straight boundaries, often of quickthorn hedges, running from the road to the sinuous and more substantial old green edges. The older timber-framed farmhouses are set back along the old edge, while post-enclosure brick buildings line the new roads.

The difficult wet land of the plateau was also often used for medieval deer parks, with examples in existence at Eye and Dennington as early as 1086. Many were 'disparked' and converted to farmland in the 16th century, but often the outline can still be traced in the field boundaries, as at Framlingham (park of the earls and dukes of Norfolk: 716 a/290 ha), Wetheringsett (bishops of Ely: 365 a/148 ha), Thorndon (earls and dukes of Suffolk: including Rishangles Park 240 a/97 ha), Hoxne (bishops of Norwich: 191 a/77 ha), South Elmham St James (bishops of Norwich: 199 a/80 ha) and elsewhere. Names such as Park Farm or Lodge Farm are often indicative of these former parks. Many of the parks were wooded or partly so and there is frequently a close association with other areas of woodland and/or greens, eg. Depperhaugh Wood and Reading Green beside the Hoxne park, Hestley Green and Rishangles Green at Thorndon, and Park Street Green, Broad Green and Blacksmith's Green at Wetheringsett, suggesting the former existence of larger areas of woodland on the plateau.

The flat plateau was also extensively used for World War II airfields, as at Great Ashfield, Mendlesham, Horham, Metfield and Halesworth. Some of the runways and buildings still survive, but most of the sites have been developed for warehouse and industrial units.

Settlement

A recurrent theme in this landscape is the pairing of medieval churches and manorial halls on the locally best land in their parishes, usually close to a water source. The origins of these 'hall-and-church' groupings seem to go back to Late Saxon times and many have remained as simple as that, though with the rebuilding of the key structures over time and the frequent addition of a status-enhancing moat around the hall in the 13th or 14th century. Others have grown into hamlets or small villages, particularly towards the western edge of the plateau. Elsewhere there are dispersed farmsteads along the winding roads and lanes and clusters of houses around the margins of the greens. Many of the farmstead sites are medieval in origin and there are a large number that are moated to denote their medieval manorial or freehold status. The green-side settlements are both later than the 'hall-and-church' complexes and have different topographical positions, as a result of which medieval churches are rare on the greens.

The area has a nationally-significant store of traditional timber-framed buildings of medieval and Tudor date. These usually have plastered and colour-washed exteriors under peg-tiled or thatched roofs. Some houses had fashionable brick facades added in the 19th century. Great houses are rare – the 14th century castle of the de la Poles, earls and dukes of Suffolk, on the edge of Wingfield Green and the moated early Tudor brick mansion of Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk, on Westhorpe Green (demolished in the 18th century) are among the few exceptions.

Red brick and slate or pan-tiled roofs were commonly used for 19th century and later buildings. The abundant local clay was widely used in the 19th century for the construction of clay lump buildings. This East Anglian building technique employing large bricks of unfired clay was particularly used for farm buildings and the clay-plastered exterior walls were frequently tarred to weatherproof them. Many of these have suffered from neglect and are now showing signs of serious rain erosion. The needs of modern arable farming have made many of the traditional farm buildings redundant and an ever-increasing number are being converted to domestic use. Their modern replacements are large metal and concrete sheds with substantial hard-standings around them.

Trees and woodland cover

The landscape is now dominated by arable farming and there are only very small woodlands that tend to be associated with farmsteads. Only around Denham, Hoxne and Redlingfield is there a small collection of ancient woodlands associated with the valleys of the Chickering Beck and the Gold Brook. Hedges are variable in their visual impact, often gappy and many are nothing more than lines of suckering elms. Boundary trees, especially ash and oak (often pollarded) are, however, present in many of the hedges. Poplars are ubiquitous in association with farmsteads and in the open landscape have a disproportionate impact given their numbers.

Visual experience

The overall experience is of open views that are only sometimes confined by hedges and trees. Slight changes in slope can have a profound effect on what and how much of the landscape can be seen and in the small valleys it is possible to find quite confined

landscapes with intimate views. However the lasting impression is generally the wide, open views of arable land with small clusters of trees and houses on the horizon.

Condition

Outside the settlement clusters there is little sense of development except for the industrial buildings on the old airfield sites or those associated with intensive pig and poultry production. Suburbanisation has, so far, had very little impact in this landscape and it remains, like the Fens and much of the Estate Sandlands, a working, farmed, countryside.

There are pockets of well-preserved field systems and some superb greens in this landscape but much has been weakened by the changes to farming in the last two centuries. Attempts have been made to remedy some of the damage through significant amounts of new hedge planting, though these often look more like rows of plants rather than the substantial, regularly-coppiced hedges and associated ditches of the traditional landscape.