

Countryside Character
Volume 5:
West Midlands

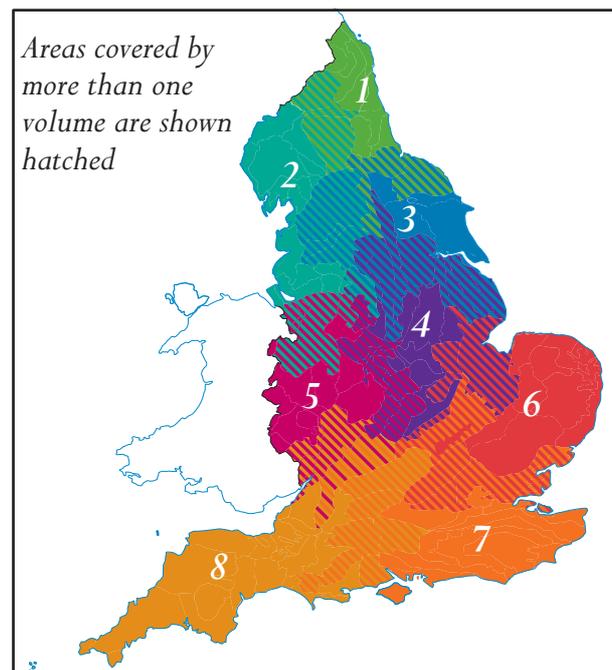
The character of
England's natural and
man-made landscape

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Acknowledgements

The Countryside Agency acknowledges the contribution to this publication of a great many individuals, partners and organisations without which it would not have been possible. We also wish to thank Chris Blandford Associates, the lead consultants on this project.

The Wye Valley at Symonds Yat, a classic Wye Valley viewpoint looking north towards the South Herefordshire plain.



Foreword

As soon as I saw the Character Map of England I realised that it should have been one of the front pages of my school atlas. Not only does it reflect influences such as geology and landform, but it also records the effect of thousands of years of human activity within an ever-evolving natural world. Thus it, and the supporting descriptive documents, are not merely a celebration of the diversity of our country but they are also an important educational and planning tool – for today and tomorrow.

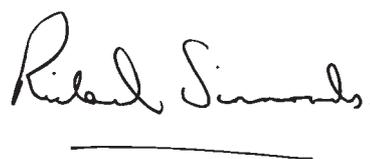
For unless we recognise and understand the special and local nature of the variety of character within England, we can never hope to protect it, conserve it or even put right some of the damage we have done to it.

A better understanding of what we have now is at the heart of achieving sustainable development in the future.

The landscape descriptions and maps presented here, set out the qualities of today's countryside. They do not ascribe values to particular aspects of the countryside. That is for

others to do in a way which is appropriate to the particular purpose for which they want the information. The Countryside Agency will use it to inspire its work.

We have a unique legacy to bequeath to our children – a legacy not just of biodiversity; not just about landscape or history. It is the juxtaposition of town, country and coast; of land form and land use; of history and modern progress; it is, in two words, England's Character; and this book, along with its companion volumes, will tell you what that means.



A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Richard Simmonds". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath it.

Richard Simmonds
Chairman, Countryside Commission, 1996-1999

Introduction

The character of England

Think of England and the chances are that you will conjure up an image of the countryside.

That image might be of a willow lined river, quietly meandering through pastures, where cows graze. It might be of a windswept fell, cloaked in purple heather and bounded by crumbling grey stone walls. It might equally be of pylons marching across fields of yellow rape set against a steel grey sky. Or perhaps of dark sunken lanes cutting through chalk ridges crowned with beech and ash woodland. Your image, whatever it is, will grow in your mind as you begin to add in other things you associate with it - a distant church spire, the song of skylarks, the angular horizon of slag heaps, the sudden view across open downland to a hidden vale below.

This is the character of England's countryside. This and much more. We may each have our own particular image, a personal response to our own backgrounds and experiences - together these images reflect the rich and diverse character of England's countryside as a whole. Many different elements combine to create this character. Because of this there is tremendous variety in that character. To recognise the variation in countryside character is to understand how the many influences upon it combine to give a sense of place, to set a tract of countryside apart from adjacent areas. That is what this publication does.

Everywhere has character. As a society, we already place a higher value upon some areas of countryside than the rest. We do this with legislation by, for example, designating National Parks; by spending public money to help look after areas - through schemes such as Environmentally Sensitive Areas; and through our own behaviour, by going to certain places on holiday, for instance. Countryside character is present in all these areas and in the rest of the countryside. Recognising and understanding countryside character is equally important across the whole of England. How we choose to respond to that understanding is the next step, which is not undertaken in this publication.

Most of us have a strong sense of local pride. As we move rapidly towards a global society, we increasingly value the 'anchor' that our local identity gives us. We have pride in both our immediate surroundings, whether it be town or country, and also in feeling that we are part of something that is different, that has a unique sense of place. The character of the countryside is an important part of what many of us take pride in. It may be that we live in the

countryside, or that it provides our workplace. It may be that we visit it often, or travel through it. It may even be that we have only experienced it through other media - literature, art, television. But for one or all of these reasons, we identify and take pride in the character of England's countryside.

The irony is that as we increasingly begin to appreciate our local distinctiveness, we are also beginning to realise how vulnerable that distinctiveness can be. In an age of mass production, standardisation, economies of scale and international markets, those elements of our countryside that have traditionally been driven by local influences are being quickly eroded. The materials and style of new buildings, the breed of cattle in the field, the shape of the hedgerows, the village sign, the farm gates and buildings are just a few examples. In all of these there is a trend towards uniformity: it is becoming ever more difficult to identify from your surroundings which part of the countryside you are in. It is, therefore, more important than ever that we understand what contributes to the character of England's countryside. Then, we can recognise the impact on this character of the decisions we take, both as individuals and as a society.

The Countryside Agency and countryside character

The Countryside Agency is concerned with the whole of England's countryside.

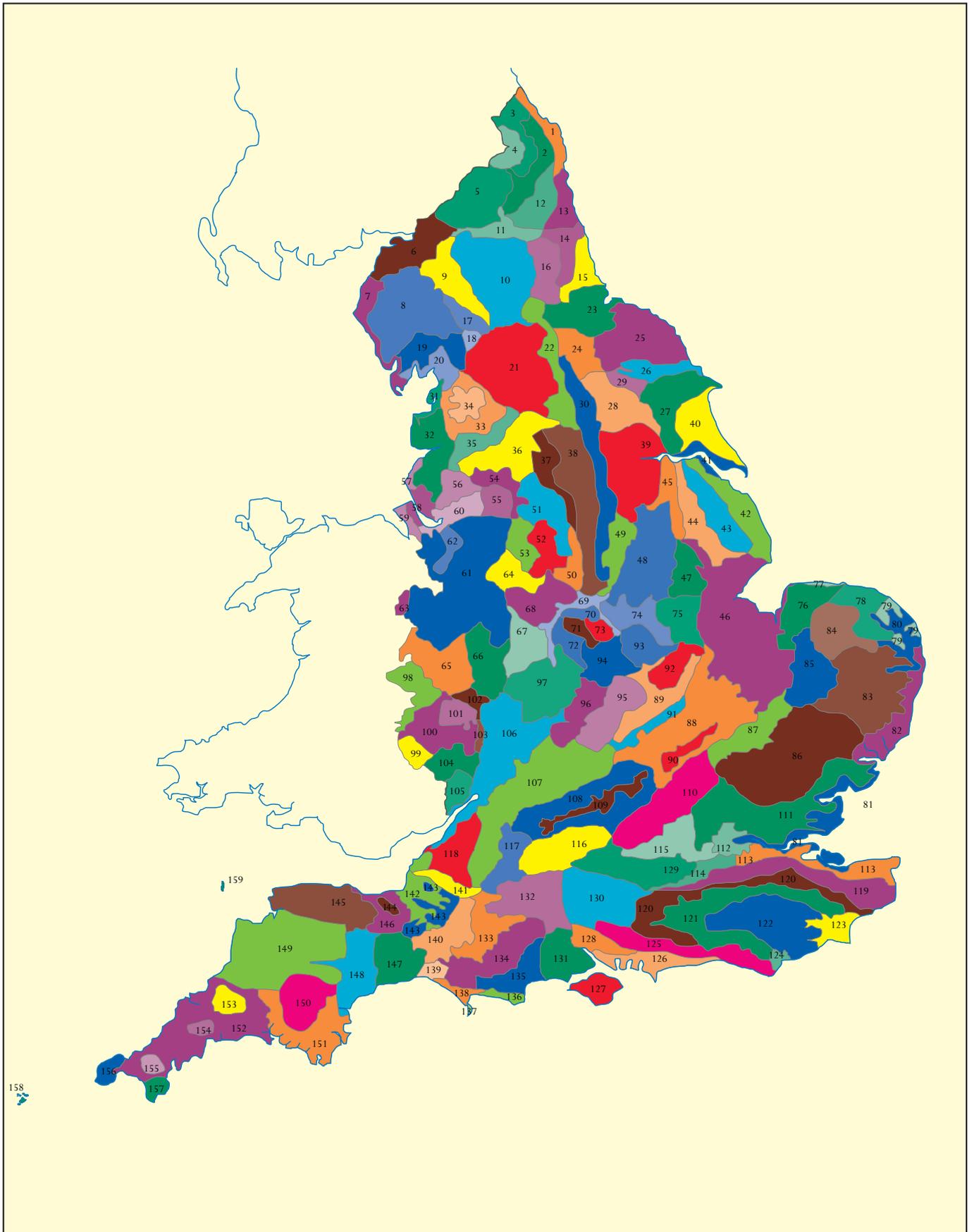
The English countryside is a priceless national asset. It is fundamental to our national identity as well as a rich source for our local identity. This is reflected in popular public opinion (*Public Attitudes to the Countryside*, Countryside Commission, CCP 481, 1997, £4). The most remarkable aspect of England's countryside is its diversity. The Countryside Agency believes that it is in the national interest to protect and strengthen this diversity. Our work to identify and describe the character of England, which we are publishing here, is intended to:

- raise awareness of the diversity of countryside character we enjoy;
- increase understanding of what contributes to that character and what may influence it in the future; and
- encourage everyone to respect the character of the countryside and take account of it in everything that they do.

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50	Derbyshire Peak Fringe and Lower Derwent	129	Thames Basin Heaths
51	Dark Peak	130	Hampshire Downs
52	White Peak	131	New Forest
53	South West Peak	132	Salisbury Plain and West Wiltshire Downs
54	Manchester Pennine Fringe	133	Blackmoor Vale and Vale of Wardour
55	Manchester Conurbation	134	Dorset Downs and Cranborne Chase
56	Lancashire Coal Measures	135	Dorset Heaths
57	Sefton Coast	136	South Purbeck
58	Merseyside Conurbation	137	Isle of Portland
59	Wirral	138	Weymouth Lowlands
60	Mersey Valley	139	Marshwood and Powerstock Vales
61	Shropshire, Cheshire and Staffordshire Plain	140	Yeovil Scarplands
62	Cheshire Sandstone Ridge	141	Mendip Hills
63	Oswestry Uplands	142	Somerset Levels and Moors
64	Potteries and Churnet Valley	143	Mid Somerset Hills
65	Shropshire Hills	144	Quantock Hills
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67	Cannock Chase and Cank Wood	146	Vale of Taunton and Quantock Fringes
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69	Trent Valley Washlands	148	Devon Redlands
70	Melbourne Parklands	149	The Culm
71	Leicestershire and South Derbyshire Coalfield	150	Dartmoor
72	Mease/Sence Lowlands	151	South Devon
73	Charnwood	152	Cornish Killas
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The Character of England: landscape, wildlife & natural features



Two examples which show how the key characteristics of the West Midlands combine to create character areas.

Cannock Chase and Cank Wood

The landscape of Cannock Chase and Cank Wood clearly demonstrates its main historical stages. Cannock Chase itself, a block of higher ground at the heart of the character area, displays its origins as a medieval hunting forest. This relatively unpopulated area is surrounded by the extensively settled South Staffordshire Coalfield, the Black Country, Birmingham and the Trent, Stour and Penk Valleys. It began to develop its industrial and urban character early in the industrial revolution and, consequently, it contains many sites significant in English social and economic history.

Cannock Chase lies on a central elevated plateau. It is wild, unenclosed and heavily wooded with a varied, often steeply-sloping surface dominated by heathland and conifer plantations. There is much local variety within the many valleys, known locally as slades. This wild character contrasts strongly with the surrounding farmland and built-up areas. The Chase is an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and is heavily used for recreation due to its proximity to the West Midlands conurbation.

South of the Chase, the landscape is dominated by extensive settlements which sprawl along the straight roads and field boundaries of 19th century enclosures with little heed to landform. Although the Black Country is often shown as a continuous urban area on modern maps, it is still in many places a loose-knit mixture of urban, industrial and countryside characteristics. Features typical of coalfield landscapes - tips, opencast sites and reclamation sites - still characterise the area, it is, however a landscape undergoing a process of change as major green and brown field development replaces evidence of its former industries and fills in the spaces between settlements. Within settlements, red-brick terraced houses and high-density post-war development tend to predominate.

To the east, around Chorley, the landscape has a very rural character, and is mainly used for stock-rearing. It is characterised by an irregular field pattern of small fields, intact hedgerows and mature oaks with small woodlands, narrow sunken lanes and clustered red-brick and whitewashed farmsteads. As the land drops down eastwards towards Lichfield and westwards into the Penk Valley, the landscape becomes gently rolling with large arable fields, coverts and belts of trees. In contrast, towards Stafford in the north-west, there is a landscape of older villages such as Brocton and Milford which are expanding in response to strong demand for housing in this area. Here, the hedges are generally better maintained, the landscape remaining predominantly open and arable. Historic parks are a feature of the landscape.

There is considerable variation within the Black Country's complex landscape pattern. Some of the settlements such as Dudley with its castle, wooded hill, medieval street plan and remaining Georgian buildings have a strong sense of identity. Others, like Tipton, dominated by uniform rows of terraced housing are less distinctive. Between the urban areas are patches of derelict and unreclaimed land, subsidence ponds, fragmented farmland and patches of naturally regenerated scrub and young woodland, in addition to parks, golf courses and public open spaces. Rising above the plateau, are prominent small hills including Rowley Regis, Turner's Hill and Wrens Nest Hill. Forming prominent landmarks, they separate the core of the Black Country from the strongly undulating landscape of the Stour valley.

To the north of Birmingham and west of West Bromwich there are many more areas of open land, primarily in agricultural use, but with a large historic park at Sutton Park and fragments of heathland, such as Barr Beacon. There are medium-sized fields with many hedged lanes, generally with good quality hedgerows, patches of ancient enclosure fields and fragments of acid grassland, pools, fens and ancient woodland. There is a real feeling of countryside despite the nearness of the built-up areas.

Black Mountains and Golden Valley

The Black Mountains and Golden Valley is an area of essentially Welsh border character. The area represents the transition from the eastern edge of the Black Mountains to the wide, fertile Golden Valley which is strongly identified with the Herefordshire Lowlands in the east. This mixture of cultures, history and geography is the area's strongest characteristic and is particularly evident in its place names and its wealth of defended sites.

To the east the area has a strongly varied pattern of pasture, arable, and coniferous and deciduous woodland. At its eastern edge a prominent wooded ridge rises out of the lowlands. The ridge subsides into the wide floodplain of the Golden Valley, intensively cultivated for centuries. There are extensive areas of arable land, with low hedges and sparse hedgerow tree cover, contrasting with the pasture of the valley sides. Outside the Golden Valley there are extensive areas of grazing land with a strong pattern of hedgerows and hedgerow trees.

The villages are small, although some have been enlarged in recent years, with fine older buildings in red sandstone or grey limestone. Traditionally these buildings were roofed with local stone slates which have been progressively replaced by Welsh slate. The majority of the larger villages were planned settlements of the 12th - 14th centuries, of which Longtown is a good example. In the west, the Welsh character is evident in the pattern of the building styles. The deep red ruins of the Cistercian Abbey Dore, the mottes along the valley side and Moccas Park with its splendid oaks, are evocative evidence of the area's rich medieval heritage. The fine farm buildings in local stone are indicators of its continued prosperity.

Whilst there is evidence of neolithic and bronze age activity on the ridge tops, there is but shadowy evidence of pre-Norman settlement. Outside the Golden Valley and apart from the enclosure of upland grazing in the 18th and 19th centuries, the medieval landscape pattern has been maintained more or less intact down to the present day.

From the Golden Valley the landscape begins its transition to the uplands. This area is characterised by irregular pasture fields, commonly with mature hedgerow oaks and overgrown hedges. These features thin out at the ridge tops, where a more regular pattern and larger fields are apparent. Small hamlets are interspersed with isolated farmsteads.

As the land continues to rise, hedgerow trees decrease and hedges become lower. There are increasingly prominent views of the abrupt moorland edge of the Black Mountains. Further west, the field boundaries and improved pasture give way to windswept acid grassland and moorland. Offa's Dyke national trail runs along the high crest offering uninterrupted views across much of the Welsh Marches.

The Countryside Commission, the Countryside Agency's predecessor, had a long association with areas of the countryside that are designated as being of national importance (such as the National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty). It was active for many years in trying to encourage greater understanding and more active management of the wider countryside. Through this work, it became apparent that we lacked a consistent and comprehensive understanding of what gave the countryside of England its character. This is an essential starting point for guiding our own policies and decisions and for encouraging others to take account of the impact of their own decisions on the countryside.

The Countryside Commission worked with other bodies to develop the technique of landscape assessment (*Landscape assessment guidance, Countryside Commission, 1993, CCP 423*). This identifies those things that are having an influence on a tract of countryside and describes how the landscape reflects this. It has been applied at a wide range of scales, for a variety of purposes. Even so, much of England's countryside had never had such an assessment carried out which made it impossible to build up a national picture using landscape assessments.

The Countryside Commission identified the need for a new approach, which looked at the whole of England's countryside. This would use a consistent approach nationally. It would need to be at a broad enough scale to give national coverage, whilst ensuring that significant variation in the character of the countryside was picked up. It would provide a consistent national framework within which more detailed local landscape assessments would sit. This approach, which the Countryside Agency has fully adopted, is described in more detail below.

How we have defined the character of England's countryside

Our approach to mapping and describing the character of England's countryside can best be described as a combination of computer based statistical analysis and the consistent application of structured landscape assessment techniques. We initially piloted the approach in the south west of England (*The New Map of England: A Celebration of the South Western Landscape, Countryside Commission, CCP 444, 1994, £20*) from which a successful methodology was developed that was suitable for extending to the national scale. The south west pilot study produced a map of cohesive landscape character areas.

As part of the study, we asked a cross section of the public if they identified with the character areas produced - they did. On the strength of the pilot study, the Commission decided to develop the methodology for use nationally.

The National Mapping Project

The character of the countryside is the result of many different factors or variables. It is the way in which these combine that gives broad areas of the countryside a cohesive and distinctive character. The National Mapping project looked at how these variables combined across England as a basis for the mapping of distinctive character areas. The approach involved:

- identifying the variables that needed to be included;
- obtaining information on each variable for every 1 kilometre square of England; these are called the national data sets;
- combining all the national data sets through a computer based statistical analysis technique, known as TWINSpan;
- using the results of the TWINSpan analysis to inform the mapping of cohesive character areas.

The **variables** - these included physical influences (geological, topographical and soils based) and cultural and historical influences (human activity). They were selected by an inter-agency group which the Countryside Commission set up to oversee the countryside character work, following a lot of background research on availability of data and the feasibility of national coverage. In particular, the involvement of English Nature and English Heritage was essential in this process, ensuring that both the ecological and historical dimensions were properly reflected.

The **national data sets** - 12 national data sets were used. These are described in the box on page 11. They were put together in a variety of different ways. Some simply had to be extracted from existing source material (eg altitude), others required interpretation of existing information (eg surface geology and ecological character). Some had to be specially created through empirical research (eg field pattern and density and industrial history).

Each data set has a number of attributes. The number of attributes varied between data sets. For example, the settlement pattern data set has only seven attributes, relating to the extent to which settlement is dispersed or clustered together. By contrast, the surface geology data set has 27 attributes reflecting the variety of solid and drift deposits occurring. For each data set, every kilometre square of England was assigned an attribute; hence, each kilometre square has 12 attributes. Full information on the attributes is contained in a Technical Report (*Countryside Character Initiative National Mapping Project, technical report of the computer phase, June 1997, Chris Blandford Associates - unpublished*). A map of each of the national data sets was produced, illustrating the distribution of all attributes across the country. Some examples of these as they relate to the West Midlands region are shown in Figures 1 - 5 on page 10.

Examples from the Countryside Character Programme National Mapping Project related to the West Midlands



Figure 1
FARM TYPES

Reproduced and adapted from an original provided by FRCA.

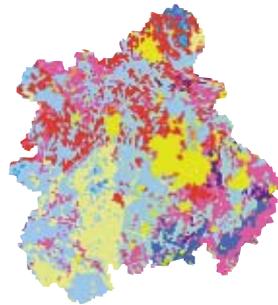


Figure 2
ECOLOGICAL CHARACTER

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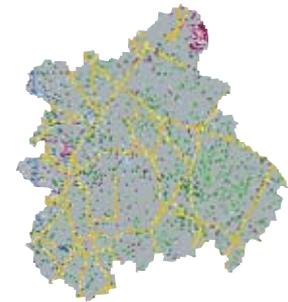


Figure 3
VISIBLE ARCHAEOLOGY

Based on information supplied by kind permission of RCHME.

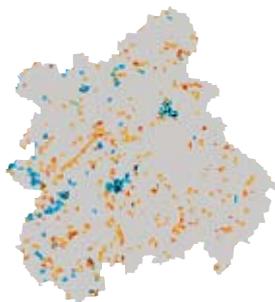


Figure 4
WOODLAND COVER

Based on the Ordnance Survey Map © Crown Copyright 1998
Licence No. GD272434

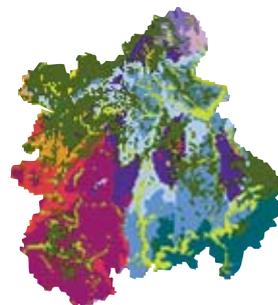


Figure 5
SURFACE GEOLOGY

Geological map © NERC. All rights reserved. Topographical map
© Crown Copyright reserved.

For all the above figures, colour visual representations derived from IDRISI image for information purposes only. Coastline is an approximation.

TWINSPAN analysis - the details of this process are set out in the Technical Report. The basic principle is that all the kilometre squares in the sample (the whole of England) can be divided up into a number of groups on the basis of the presence or absence of a particular attribute. This subdivision continues until an appropriate number of end groups are reached, each of which will contain kilometre squares with similar attributes. The map which resulted from this then informed the definition of character areas.

Map images were derived from the TWINSPAN analysis using all the national data sets and four selected physiographical data sets, respectively. They illustrate how physical factors, such as landform and geology, strongly influence character at the regional and national scale and how historical and cultural factors are significant in providing the more local variation on these broader patterns.

Informing the character mapping – the process outlined above was then used to help inform the definition of character areas, broad tracts of countryside exhibiting a cohesive character. This was also based upon a more conventional landscape assessment approach, which drew upon the knowledge and experience of a wide range of people involved in countryside planning and management, a considerable body of existing landscape assessment work and some limited additional fieldwork. The results of the TWINSPAN process were used to validate this more subjective view of countryside character and ensure that the character areas were defined in a consistent way across the whole of England.

The Character of England map: a joint approach

English Nature and English Heritage have both been closely associated with the development of the countryside character approach. English Heritage, as the government agency responsible for the historic dimension of the countryside, worked closely with the Countryside Commission in developing and sourcing the cultural and historical data sets, and advising on the broader process of characterisation. English Nature similarly worked with the Countryside Commission in respect of the soils derived data sets (ecological character and land capability) but their involvement in the mapping process has been more fundamental.

English Nature developed a similar approach to identifying and mapping the countryside according to the distribution of habitats and natural features, which they refer to as natural areas. This work was brought into the definition of character areas with a view to a single joint map of landscape, wildlife and natural features being produced. This was achieved, and the map is shown on page 7. Both English Nature and the Countryside Agency now work from the basis of this joint framework. Both recognise all the character areas identified on it. However, because physical influences are of primary importance in determining ecological variations, English

The National Datasets

Altitude: 10 altitudinal attributes, based on Ordnance Survey Digital Terrain Model

Landform: 10 landform classification attributes, based on original interpretation of existing altitude and slope data

Ecological characteristics: 12 ecological character attributes, using drainage and base status as determinants; provided by Soil Survey and Land Research Centre

Land capability: 7 inherent agricultural land capability attributes, based on soil type and drainage characteristics; provided by Soil Survey and Land Research Centre

Surface geology: 27 surface geology attributes, derived from existing data on solid and drift geology; provided by British Geological Survey

Farm types: 17 categories of farm type, based on Standard Man Day data recorded through MAFF agricultural census; provided by Resource Planning Team, ADAS

Settlement patterns: 7 settlement pattern attributes, based on categorisation of Royal Mail Delivery Point Data; provided by Birkbeck College, University of London

Woodland cover: 8 attributes for woodland type and categories of percentage cover, derived from interpretation of Bartholomew's 1:100000 map series; based on Ordnance Survey

Field density & pattern: 16 categories of field pattern and field density, based on original interpretation of map data by Lancaster University Archaeological Unit, on behalf of Countryside Commission and English Heritage

Visible Archaeology: 12 attributes combining visibility and period, based on interpretation of original data on monuments and linear features provided by the National Monuments Record Centre of the Royal Commission for Historic Monuments in England

Industrial History: 16 categories of dominant industrial history, based on original interpretation of map and documentary sources by Lancaster University Archaeological Unit, on behalf of Countryside Commission and English Heritage

Designed parkland: 7 extant parkland density attributes, derived from comparison of 1918 Ordnance Survey series with current 1:50000 Ordnance Survey

Nature often aggregate the joint character areas into their larger natural areas.

Describing the character of England

Having identified and mapped the character of England, we have gone on to describe each of the character areas shown on the map. It is the descriptions for the character areas in the West Midlands that are contained in this publication.

The descriptions have been developed through the wide ranging consultation process referred to above, which also informed the character mapping. Views from interested parties have been sought and material drawn from a great variety of sources. Nationally, over 800 people have contributed, through meetings, seminars and written comment.

For each area, the description seeks to evoke what sets it apart from any other. It aims to put our mental image of that area into words. Each description also provides an explanation of how that character has arisen and how it is changing, and gives some pointers to future management issues. The descriptions are not intended to prescribe any particular course of action as a response to that; only to inform the decision making process.

The character of England: shaping the future

The material contained in this publication describes the character of England's countryside at the end of the 20th century. This character has evolved over thousands of years, as a result of a complex interaction between nature and human activity. The pace of change over that time has ebbed and flowed and will continue to do so. The character of England is dynamic.

The identification and description of the character of England's countryside does not mean that we are seeking to 'freeze' that character at this moment in time. The purpose of the work is to ensure that we understand - from a widely accepted common reference point - the character of England's countryside. Only in this way can we all take proper account of that in all the decisions we make which

will have a bearing on it. Greater awareness and understanding will engender greater respect and local pride. This will inform and shape change to make a positive contribution to strengthening countryside character.

We envisage this happening in a number of ways; for example by:

- **focusing national policies** – decisions and activities that have a major bearing on the character of the countryside are often driven by national and international policies, such as land use planning or the Common Agricultural Policy. There is increasing recognition that such policies need to be developed and applied more flexibly at a regional scale to improve their effectiveness and make them more responsive to local needs and priorities. The character of England provides a framework which can be used to provide a regional resolution for such policies, so that they take more account of the needs and opportunities within each region.
- **giving national meaning to local action** – encouraging local pride lies at the heart of ensuring that the character of England continues in all its diversity into the future. Local people have the greatest potential of all to recognise and strengthen local distinctiveness. The character of England provides a national context for local action, strengthening the link between local and national heritage, and providing a source of information and ideas to feed into local decision making.

Countryside Character is being published in 8 volumes, following the boundaries of the administrative areas of the Government Offices for the Regions:

North East
North West
Yorkshire & the Humber
East Midlands
West Midlands
East of England
South East & London
South West

(Merseyside is included in the North West volume).