

March 2002

# A Character Assessment of Oxford in its Landscape Setting



Final Report prepared by  
Land Use Consultants



**A CHARACTER ASSESSMENT OF  
OXFORD CITY IN ITS  
LANDSCAPE SETTING**

**Prepared for  
The Countryside Agency  
and Oxford City Council  
by  
Land Use Consultants**

**March 2002**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Land Use Consultants (LUC) prepared this report on behalf of the Countryside Agency and Oxford City Council, with specialist expertise on the historic environment provided by Oxford Archaeology (OA).

The study has been steered by an Advisory Group with the following members:

Councillor John Goddard (Chair)	City Councillor
Professor Brian Goodey	Oxford Brookes University
Christine Tudor	Countryside Agency
Steve Pickles	Oxford City Council
Bob Staig	Oxford City Council
Craig Blackwell	Oxfordshire County Council
Virginia Hinze	English Heritage
Matt Edworthy	English Nature

We are grateful for the guidance and advice provided by the Advisory Group. The views and recommendations in this report are, however, those of Land Use Consultants.

The study has involved consultation and gathering of existing data and information and we appreciate the time and involvement of many individuals and organisations. In particular we have drawn upon information collected as part of a series of public consultation exercises, including information gathering workshops, feedback workshops and a public exhibition at St. Ebbes House. These consultations yielded a great deal of useful information and a level of local detail and understanding that has contributed greatly to the study. The Community Council for Berkshire (CCB) assisted us in organising the workshops. We are very grateful for the involvement of all those who participated in the workshops.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Background

The Countryside Agency, in partnership with Oxford City Council commissioned this Character Assessment of the whole of Oxford City and its setting, in recognition of the importance of the city's landscape and townscape and the changes that it faces. The assessment is a systematic study and takes a holistic approach in considering historic, cultural and architectural associations, open places, wildlife and natural habitats and perceptual characteristics that together create the very special sense of place that is Oxford.

The Countryside Agency's primary objective in commissioning the research was to extend the principles of character assessment, already well developed for rural areas, to historic towns and cities. A subsidiary function has been to develop a methodology that can assist in securing the long-term protection and enhancement of historic urban environments.

## Methodology

The method for undertaking the character assessment was adapted from the accepted method promoted by the Countryside Agency as set out in the document "*Interim Landscape Character Assessment Guidance 1999*" and the approach used for a study of *Winchester City and its Setting* in 1998.

## Influences on Landscape Character

The Oxford landscape is dynamic and has evolved and changed over time in response to prevailing social and economic conditions. Historically, changes in agriculture and timber requirements, changes in the socio-economic structure of local communities and industrialisation have all had a significant impact. More recently expansion of residential areas, changing patterns of employment, demand for out of town shopping and business facilities, increased traffic levels and infrastructure development have all been dominant influences on local character. It is the cumulative effect of these past changes that has created the distinctive character of the city today and the landscape of Oxford will continue to evolve in the future.

## Managing Landscape Change

Oxford, with its rich heritage and landscape features, is particularly sensitive. It is increasingly valued as a resource for tourism and recreation, as well as for its intrinsic historic, nature conservation and landscape interest. It is vital that changes are carefully managed to maintain the qualities that make this city special. Change, even within the most sensitive areas, is inevitable. The principal aim for the future must be to manage change so as to take opportunities to enhance as well as conserve. The character based approach can help in accommodating necessary change without sacrificing local character and ensure that future change in and around Oxford leads to the enhancement of the character of the City and its setting.



## **Content of the Report**

The study report begins, in Chapter 1 by setting the context for the study. It explains the basic methodology and emphasises the importance of stakeholder consultation, which figured prominently in the middle part of the work.

**Part 1** of the report provides an understanding of the of the main influences on the contemporary landscape of Oxford, including its broader landscape setting within the County, the topographic, geological and ecological conditions, human influences and issues relating to the management of future change.

**Part 2** explains the underlying approach to landscape characterisation, and the process of identifying landscape types. The study identifies and describes 52 discrete areas in Oxford. Character areas are geographically specific areas of a landscape/townscape type, which have their own individual character or 'sense of place'. Each of these articulates the more important features that need to be conserved and points to further improvements that can be made.

**Part 3** of the report explains how the Character area assessment can be related to landscape and townscape policies in the Oxford Local Plan. As such, the descriptions should provide a useful basis for helping to formulate policies on future development in these areas and should support development control decisions and judgements on design and aesthetic considerations. This section of the report also sets out a method for valuing the Character areas in terms of their landscape and townscape sensitivity using seven criteria covering landscape quality, biodiversity value, historic integrity, the extent of inter-visibility, presence or absence of open space, re-creatability of the landscape and townscape, and overall sensitivity.

The present study is only the first stage in this research process, and more detailed work will be required within the individual character areas, but the methodology and findings of the present work are based on robust assessment and provide the starting point for generating a comprehensive strategy.

# I. INTRODUCTION

---

## BACKGROUND

- I.1. The landscape and its relationship to the built environment of Oxford City is of great significance. It has been termed an 'Iconic Landscape', and is recognised worldwide for its distinctive buildings, skyline of domes and 'dreaming spires'; interweaving rivers and meadows set within a rural framework, are contained by wooded ridges. The Oxford landscape consists, however, of more than these 'iconic' features and the evolution of the urban form, cultural associations, relationship of the public and private realms, the density and massing of buildings, the architectural dialogue and vitality all make an important contribution to the character of the city's built up areas. The value of the streetscape is highlighted by Jan Morris in her book on Oxford<sup>1</sup>:

*'Outside the college gates a wider hierarchy exists, and you may see paraded for your analysis all the social grades of an old and prosperous city of the English Midlands. One way to start is to look at the houses, for here almost the whole gamut of English domestic design may be inspected in a morning, providing a key to the kind of people who have inhabited the place.'*

- I.2. In recognition of the importance of the city's landscape and townscape and the pressures that it faces the Countryside Agency, in partnership with Oxford City Council commissioned a Character Assessment of the whole of Oxford City and its Setting. The assessment is a systematic study and takes a holistic approach articulating the palimpsest of historic, cultural and architectural associations, open places, wildlife and natural habitats and perceptual characteristics that together create the very special sense of place of Oxford.

## PURPOSE AND SCOPE

- I.3. The study has three primary objectives:
- To understand which of the open spaces in the city are important in landscape terms, both in their own right and in relation to the built up areas of the city, and why.
  - To determine the areas of the city which are sensitive to change and merit protection as part of the Local Plan Review;
  - To identify opportunities for the city's landscape to be enhanced and key areas for policy development.
- I.4. Other related ancillary objectives of the study are:
- to produce a GIS data base that is complimentary to and linked with the County character data base and to the City Council's GGP system;
  - to produce a separate report to the Countryside Agency, English Heritage and Oxford City Council on further development of the data base as an interactive

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<sup>1</sup> Morris, Jan (1965; second edition 1978) *Oxford*, Oxford University Press.

resource for public use in Oxford, and recommendations for the development of more detailed information on particular aspects of Oxford City's character;

- to generate recommendations for applying the approach to other Cathedral cities and urban areas;
- to make recommendations for the use of the results of the assessment within the Local Plan, corporate strategies and other appropriate guidance, looking at issues such as public open space, access, urban tree strategy, and local protective designations such as areas of high landscape value and wildlife corridors.

1.5. This report presents the main results of the landscape and townscape character assessment and addresses the three main objectives of the study.

## **METHODOLOGY**

1.6. The method for undertaking the landscape assessment has been adapted from the accepted method promoted by the Countryside Agency as set out in the document "*Interim Landscape Character Assessment Guidance 1999*" and the methodology used for the study of *Winchester City and its Setting* carried out by Landscape Design Associates in 1998. There is no specific guidance on the characterisation of urban areas but the principles of the approach used for rural landscapes have been interpreted for this study.

1.7. **Fit within the Hierarchy of Landscape Character Assessment:** The study has been prepared within the framework set by the Agency's Countryside Character Initiative as shown on the Character of England Map. It also fits within the context provided by the Agency's emerging National Landscape Typology. At the same time it is compatible with the emerging results of the parallel Oxfordshire county-wide assessment and should provide a finer grain of detail within the county context.

1.8. **An Integrated Approach:** The assessment seeks to present a fully integrated view of the landscape incorporating all the features and attributes that contribute to the special and distinctive character of Oxford. These include the physical, ecological, visual, historic, built and cultural features that have shaped the present day landscape.

1.9. **Scale of Assessment:** The approach to this study has involved a two-tier assessment.

- **The Landscape Assessment of Oxford in its Setting:** Once the study area for the setting of Oxford had been established a landscape character assessment of the entire area including the city and setting was characterised at a scale of 1:25,000, resulting in the identification of a series of generic landscape types and within them the constituent character areas. This gives a very clear understanding of the character of the surrounding landscape and the landscape that underlies the city.
- **The City-Wide Assessment:** On the completion of the 1:25,000 scale assessment a more detailed assessment of the urban area within the city boundary was undertaken at a scale of 1:10,000. This study identified character types (largely based on predominant land use and age of development) and, within these, local

character areas. This provided a more detailed layer that could be read in conjunction with the underlying landscape assessment.

1.10. **Process:** The process for undertaking the study is illustrated in a process diagram (figure 0.1.1). In summary, this involved six main stages, namely:

- Defining Extent of Landscape Setting
- Desk Study
- Stakeholder Consultation
- Field Survey
- Characterisation
- Making Judgements/Evaluation

### **Defining the Extent of the Landscape Setting**

1.11. The first task was to define the study area for the project. This included the city of Oxford and its *setting*. Definition of the setting involved an analysis of the landscape, visual, topographic and historic settings to the city and involved a combination of desk study and field survey.

1.12. The extent of the visual influence of the city (i.e. the area from which the city can be potentially seen from) was the major defining factor in defining the extent of the study area. This was identified through an analysis of the Zone of Visual Influence (ZVI), based on 11 of the key buildings within the city. Key Terra Firma software was used in conjunction with Digital 3D Panorama topographical tiles at 1:50,000.

#### **Recommendations for Good Practice:**

A computer generated ZVI of key (tallest and most visually important) buildings in the city is a useful tool in defining the visual setting of the city.

Existing character assessment of areas adjacent to the city can be useful in defining the extent of the landscape setting.

### **Desk Study**

1.13. The purpose of the desk study was to collate data and compile a database of layers of information that would be used to form the draft landscape and townscape character areas. This involved producing a data request form to collect and collate the following information:

- Digital 2D OS map tiles (1:25,000 and 1:10,000);
- Digital 3D Panorama topographical tiles at 1:50,000;
- Air photos;
- Geology and soil maps and agricultural land classification;

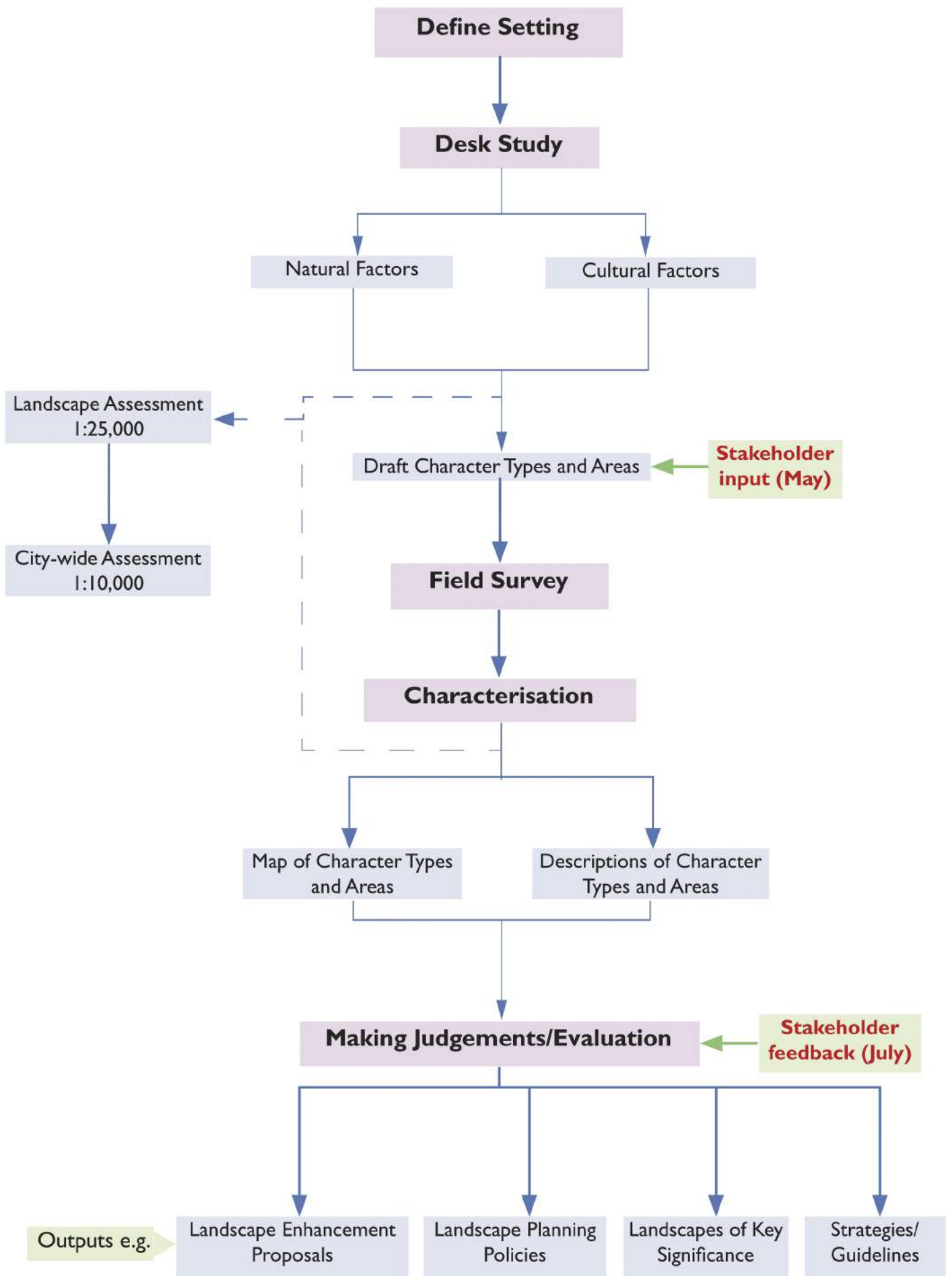


Figure 0.1.1: Process for undertaking the study

- Phase I habitat survey information, Natural Area profiles, ancient woodland inventory, BAPs and HAPs, LEAPs for the Thames and Cherwell, SSSI citations and locations, county wildlife sites and LNRs;
- Conservation Area locations and leaflets, Historic Parks and Gardens data, SAMs, cultural strategy;
- National Countryside Character Areas, other existing landscape character or townscape character assessments;
- Structure and Local Plans, Greenbelt plans, Local Plan designations;
- Historic maps showing the evolution of Oxford;
- Historic land use (provided by Oxford Archaeology).

I.14. A Geographical Information System (GIS) was used as the tool for collating, manipulating and presenting data. Draft landscape types were based on combinations of geology, topography, habitats, land use and historic features and were produced at 1:25,000 across the whole city and its setting. These were subdivided into geographically unique landscape character areas. Draft townscape types were based on combinations of land use, townscape morphology and age and were subdivided into geographically unique townscape character areas. These were mapped at 1:10,000.

I.15. The desk study also provided an opportunity to review the physical environment of Oxford (geology, landform, drainage, climate and ecological character) and the historic evolution of the city. Cultural perceptions were also reviewed to set the scene.

**Recommendations for Good Practice:**

Air photos are a very useful tool in both urban and rural assessment.

It is anticipated that the GIS database developed as part of the study will provide an important tool for future management and as an interactive resource for wider public uses.

Digital map data (both at 1:25,000 and 1:10,000) is extremely useful to produce draft character area maps for field checking.

**Stakeholder Consultation**

I.16. The purpose of the stakeholder consultation was to strengthen the landscape and townscape character assessment by providing an opportunity for stakeholder involvement.

I.17. A process of public consultation was undertaken, in association with the Berkshire Rural Community Council. The purpose of the exercise was to strengthen the character assessment by obtaining valuable information from the local community which would not otherwise come to light, such as local perceptions. The process of consultation also helped build local understanding of the process of landscape character assessment, its value and applications. Consultation took three forms:

- Participatory workshops at the outset of the study to gather information on what people value about Oxford and why, and what are perceived to be the key forces for change.
- Feedback workshops at an interim stage to show how the results of the first workshops have fed into the study and illustrate the emerging results.
- A public exhibition at St. Ebbes' during July explaining the method and process for the study and draft results with a questionnaire for specific comment of key valued features, qualities and perceived threats.

I.18. At each of the above people had an opportunity to comment on the characterisation and boundaries. More details are provided at *appendix A* to the report.

**Recommendations for Good Practice:**

Setting up databases of participants can be a very time-consuming exercise - use existing data bases held by local councils where possible.

Ensure invitation letters are sent out in good time with a tear-off slip to monitor responses. Ensure venues can provide coffee and tea, black-out and sufficient tables and chairs.

Using a local rural community council to assist with the workshop preparation and facilitation of the events is an advantage.

A combination of invitation-only workshops and an open exhibition allows a wide cross-section of the public to get involved.

**Field Survey**

I.19. The field survey provided the ground level view and allowed the hypothetical character areas to be tested on the ground. It was also important for identifying aesthetic and perceptual qualities and to gather information on strength of character, quality, sensitivity and opportunities for enhancement for use in the evaluation.

**Visual Survey**

I.20. The purpose of the visual survey was to identify important views to, and across, the city from the surrounding study area. The visual survey was undertaken by a landscape architect over two days to identify the key ridgelines surrounding Oxford and key views (including historic views) towards Oxford. View cones were marked on a map at 1:10,000. These view cones can inform the sensitivity of the intervening landscape/townscape to change such as development of tall buildings or other vertical elements that may block, or intrude into, important views.

**Landscape (1:25,000) Survey**

I.21. The broad landscape character assessment of Oxford in its setting was undertaken at a scale of 1:25,000 and involved one landscape architect in the field for one week. The purpose of the field survey was to check draft boundaries, gather data on landscape character, gather data on the contribution, and importance, of components to Oxford's landscape setting and to take a photographic record of character areas. A sample field survey sheet is attached at *Appendix E*.

### **Landscape/Townscape (1:10,000) Survey**

- I.22. The more detailed character assessment was undertaken at a scale of 1:10,000 and involved one landscape architect in the field over a period of approximately 10 days during the summer and one landscape architect and one urban designer in the field over a period of approximately 5 days during the winter. The purpose of the field survey was to check draft boundaries, gather data on townscape character (including biodiversity, archaeology, built form, open space, vitality, visual patterns), gather data on forces for change, sensitivity, vulnerability and opportunities for enhancement and take a photographic record. A sample field survey sheet is attached at *Appendix F*.

#### **Recommendations for Good Practice:**

Historic paintings and postcards can reveal important historic views of the city.

This two tier assessment requires careful tailoring of field survey forms to ensure selective data collection. It would be possible to spend the entire project budget on the 1:25,000 landscape character assessment alone. Always focus on the *purpose* of the assessment - in this case to assess the contribution of landscape elements to the setting of Oxford.

When setting project budgets cost to enable several field survey trips. At least two separate trips for the broader landscape assessment and two for the landscape/townscape assessment should be allowed.

Ideally the assessments should be undertaken by two field surveyors - in the case of the landscape/townscape assessment one should have an urban design background.

Bear in mind that an urban character assessment takes longer than a rural character assessment. Much of the townscape assessment can be done by car, but it is recommended that the historic areas are covered by foot.

### **Characterisation**

- I.23. The aims of the characterisation phase were to collate desk study data and information collected in the field to produce:
- a map of landscape types and character areas at 1:25,000 and produce brief character area descriptions for landscape types and character areas;
  - a map of townscape types and character areas at 1:10,000 and produce detailed and illustrated character area descriptions for townscape types and character areas.

#### **Recommendations for Good Practice:**

Keep the landscape type and character area descriptions brief and concentrate the main bulk of time on the townscape type and character area descriptions.

Be aware that the landscape setting is likely to fall into adjacent local authority land - make use of existing landscape assessments where possible and consult with staff from adjacent authorities to avoid conflicts with existing policies in adjacent areas.

Descriptions and checklists should be descriptive and not evaluative.

Leave plenty of time for writing up results and incorporating graphics - it's a very time-consuming process for 52 townscape character areas!



## Making Judgements/Evaluation

- I.24. The final step in the assessment is the evaluative stage. The type of evaluation undertaken will depend on the purpose of the report. In this case the townscape character assessment was intended to form the basis for policy development as part of the Local Plan review as well as to identify opportunities for the landscape and townscape to be enhanced across the city.
- I.25. The broader scale (1:25,000) landscape types were evaluated in terms of their contribution to Oxford's landscape setting. Key objectives were then set at the landscape character area level to highlight opportunities to conserve or enhance the landscape setting to Oxford.
- I.26. The character areas (1:10,000) were assessed in terms of their:
- unique or distinctive urban character (**strength of character**);
  - perception of landscape/townscape **quality**;
  - **biodiversity**,
  - **historic integrity**,
  - **inter-visibility**, between the historic core and character area;
  - extent of **landscape/open space** provided by the area;
  - **re-creatability** of the landscape;
  - **sensitivity** to adverse change, including identification of threats to local character.
- (see glossary in Appendix B for definitions of the words used)*
- I.27. Mechanisms of past and present change were also considered and an overall objective was set for each character area. Key areas to consider for policy development and townscape enhancement provided as a list of bullet points.

### Recommendations for Good Practice:

In setting objectives for each character area use wording that will tie into the wording used in the Local Plan policy so that the two documents may be cross-referenced. Develop the Local Plan policy in parallel with setting objectives for each individual character area.

Do not be overly prescriptive in identifying opportunities for enhancement. Agree wording carefully with the relevant Local Authority.

## THE STRUCTURE OF THIS REPORT

- I.28. This report is structured into three main parts, which follow the introduction and definition of the study area.

**Part I: Setting the scene:** Defines the setting of Oxford i.e. the study area and provides a summary of the main influences on contemporary landscape and townscape character. These include physical, historical, cultural and ecological characteristics. It concludes with a note on managing change in a city such as Oxford.

**Part 2: The character of Oxford and its landscape setting:** This is the body of the report and contains the detailed character assessment of the landscape setting of Oxford (1:25,000) and, nesting within this, a more detailed assessment of the City of Oxford (1:10,000).

**Part 3: Using the landscape and townscape character assessment:** The final section contains recommendations on using the results of the landscape character assessment in the Local Plan and other appropriate guidance. It sets out a range of potential future applications for this strategic study.

## **PART I: SETTING THE SCENE**

This section provides a summary of the main influences on contemporary landscape and townscape character as an introduction to the detailed assessment.

# I DEFINING THE SETTING

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## INTRODUCTION

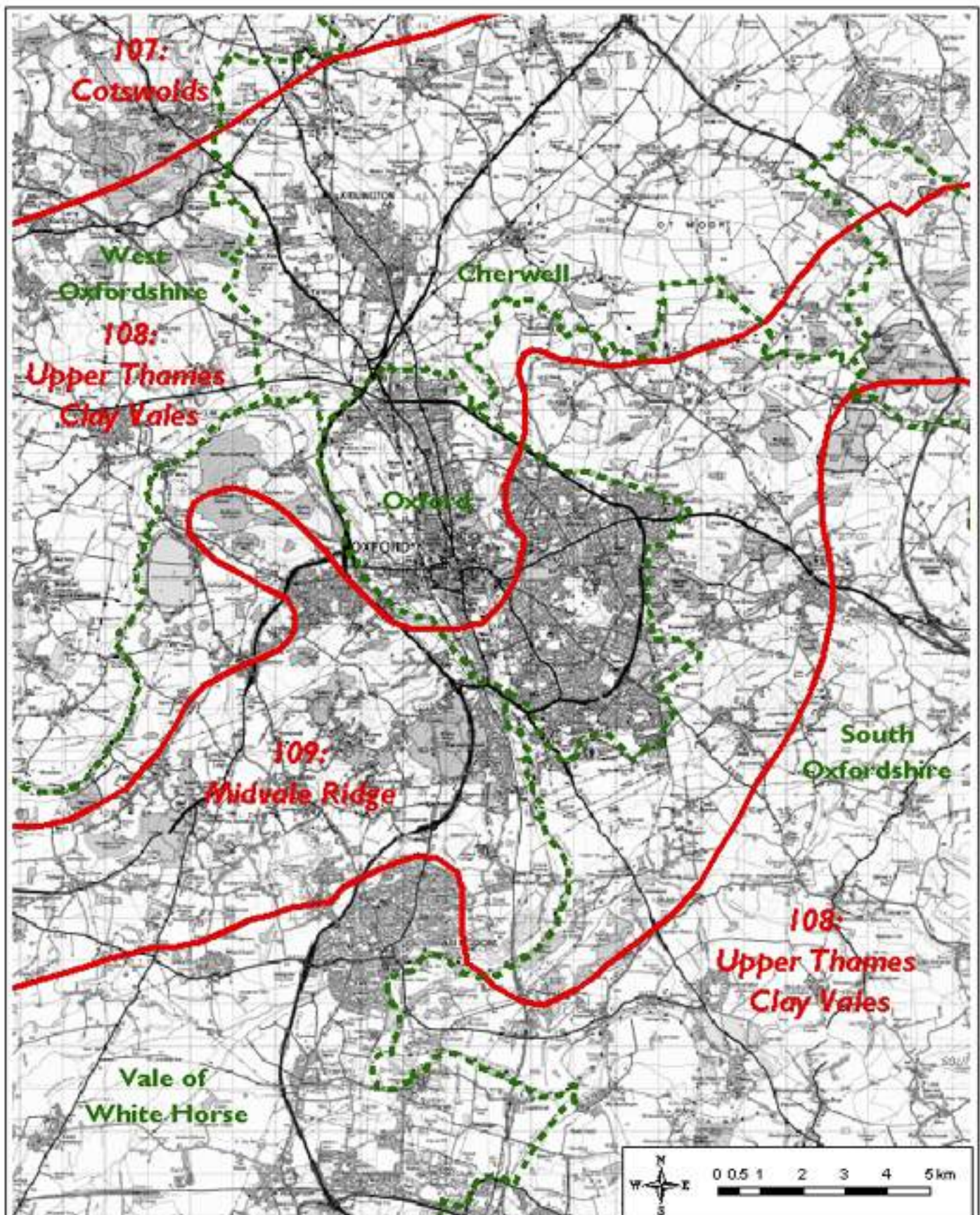
- 1.1. The purpose of defining the setting of Oxford was to set the limits for the study area. This ensured that Oxford and its landscape setting were assessed as a whole rather than stopping at the administrative boundary of the city. Some of the areas that are important to the setting of the city therefore lie outside the city's administrative boundary.
- 1.2. The City of Oxford consists of the medieval core with its surroundings comprising the North Oxford open fields, Port Meadow (and other meadow and pastures), and the other parishes that have been added to it including Wolvercote, Marston, Headington, Cowley and Iffley. Long, uninterrupted views to Oxford can be obtained from the hills surrounding the city including Elsfield Hill, Boars Hill, Shotover and Wytham. Many of these are historic views that have been well documented by painters such as Turner. The surrounding landscape infiltrates the city along the main valleys providing visual, ecological and access connectivity. The views from and to the surrounding hills and the connectivity along the river valleys means that, despite the abrupt limits of the built form and the closely encircling administrative boundary, the city remains intimately connected with its setting. This is an important and distinctive feature of its character.
- 1.3. The first task, therefore, was to define the setting of the city, with this area then forming the study area for the project. Definition of the setting involved an analysis of the landscape, visual, topographic and historic setting and involved a combination of desk study and field survey within a 'wide area of search'.

## LANDSCAPE SETTING

- 1.4. An understanding of the landscape character surrounding Oxford is critical, with different landscape types abutting the city to the north, south, east and west. A review of the existing landscape assessments gives a clear indication of the variation in character in the vicinity of the city and the extent of areas of similar character.
  - Regional Character Area Context as illustrated by the Character of England Map (*Figure 1.1.1*)
  - Oxford County Landscape Character Assessment (*Figure 1.1.2*)
  - Existing assessments undertaken by the adjoining Districts.

### Regional Character Areas

- 1.5. The Regional Character Areas identified by the Countryside Character Initiative and relevant to this study are:
  - No. 108 Upper Thames Clay Vales; and
  - No. 109 Midvale Ridge.



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### Oxford City Landscape Character Assessment

#### Key

- Countryside character area, with number and name
- District boundary with name

Figure 1.1.1:  
Regional Character Area Context

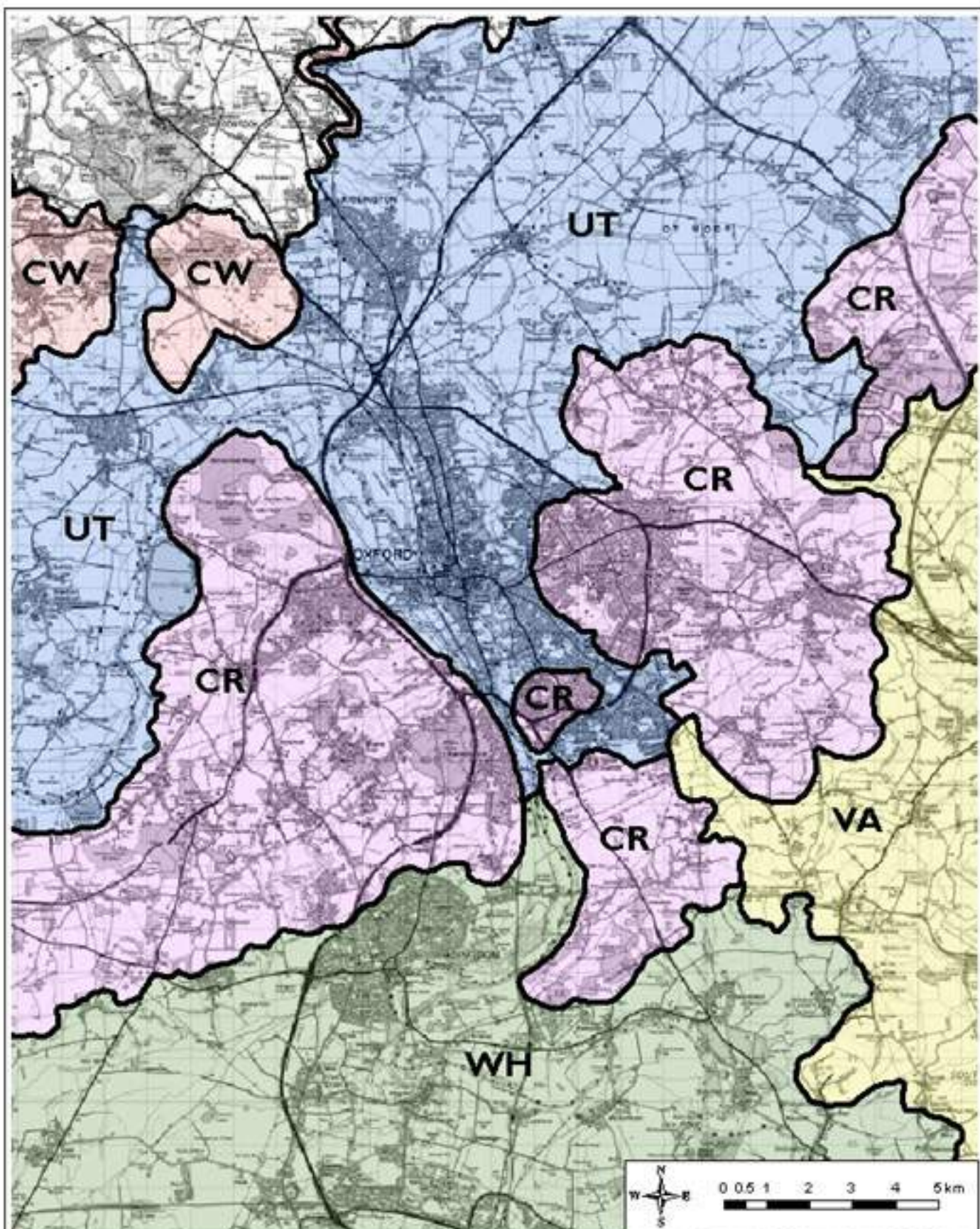
Drawing Number: 1057.01\_fig1.1\_pntcharacterarea\_001

Source: English Nature and Countryside Agency

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## Oxford City Landscape Character Assessment

Figure 1.1.2:  
Oxford County Assessment  
Land Description Units

### Key

Land Description Unit

- UT - Upper Thames
- CR - Corallian Ridge
- CW - Cotswolds
- VA - Vale of Aylesbury
- WH - Vale of White Horse

Source: Oxford County Council

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Their key characteristics<sup>2</sup> are presented in the table below.

Key Characteristics for Upper Thames Clay Vales	Key Characteristics for Midvale Ridge
<p>Broad belt of open, gently undulating lowland farmland on Upper Jurassic clays;</p> <p>Includes clay pastures and wet valley bottoms and more settled open arable lands of the gravel;</p> <p>The valley bottoms, with open floodplain landscapes displaying gravel workings and flooded pits, a regular and well ordered field pattern, willow pollards and reedbeds along water courses;</p> <p>The distinctive character of Otmoor with its patchwork pattern of small fields defined by healthy hedgerows of elm add interest and variety to this area;</p> <p>The vales in Oxfordshire are dominated by 18th century enclosure landscapes of small woods and hawthorn/blackthorn hedges;</p> <p>Brick-built buildings within the Vales reflect the widespread use of the local clay as a building material.</p>	<p>Low, irregular, wooded limestone ridge giving way to a series of isolated steep-sided tabular hills in the east which rise from the surrounding clay vales;</p> <p>Large geometrically spaced fields divided by regular pattern of hedgerows and trees supporting both arable and pastoral farming;</p> <p>Villages, typically built of local limestone, perched high up on spurs, hilltops and along ridges giving extensive views across the open, gently undulating, clay vales to the north and south;</p> <p>Visible archaeology dating from early Roman settlement of the area found on prominent areas of higher ground;</p> <p>Spring-line settlements associated with blocks of ancient woodland along the ridge;</p> <p>Contrast between the moderately elevated limestone hills and ridges and the surrounding low-lying clay vales.</p>

## Oxfordshire County Landscape Character Assessment

- 1.6. The Oxfordshire Landscape Character Assessment is currently underway and has identified a number of 'Land Description Units'. These are illustrated in *figure 1.1.2*.

### Landscape Character Assessments of Adjoining Districts

- 1.7. South Oxfordshire District lies to the east of the City of Oxford, including the enclosing hills of Shotover, Garsington and Nuneham Courtney. The South Oxford Landscape Assessment prepared for South Oxfordshire District Council by Atlantic Consultants (1998) identifies two relevant character areas:
- Oxford Heights; and
  - Nuneham Courtney Ridge.
- 1.8. Cherwell District is the most northerly district of Oxfordshire and borders Oxford to the north. Cobham Resource Consultants undertook a landscape character assessment in 1995 for Cherwell District Council. The assessment identifies one relevant character area, the Lower Cherwell Floodplain.
- 1.9. West Oxfordshire lies to the north-west of the City of Oxford, incorporating Woodstock and Witney. Atlantic Consultants prepared a landscape character

<sup>2</sup> The Countryside Agency (1999) *Countryside Character Volume 7: South East and London*

assessment of the district for West Oxfordshire District Council in 1998. The assessment identifies two relevant character areas, the Eynsham Vale (including Cassington) and the eastern Parks and Valleys (including Woodstock).

- I.10. The Vale of White Horse covers a large area to the south-west of Oxford incorporating Boar's Hill and Wytham. Although they have not prepared a full landscape character assessment the District Council have identified some broad landscape zones in their adopted local plan.
- I.11. The local landscape character context was taken into account in defining the extent of the setting of Oxford and used to ensure compatibility between this work and work already undertaken for the adjoining districts.

## **TOPOGRAPHIC SETTING**

- I.12. Critical to the character of Oxford is its location in the floodplain, overlooked by surrounding ridges. These 'heights' form an important rural backdrop to the cityscape and provide a vantage point for memorable views to the historic core as illustrated by Turner's View of Oxford from the Abingdon Road (*figure 1.1.3*). The importance of this surrounding skyline is also clearly shown in prints of the city, such as the 18<sup>th</sup> century view by Samuel and Nathaniel Buck (*figure 1.1.4*).
- I.13. A contour based topographic analysis of the city was undertaken, which clearly shows the line of low discontinuous hills rising to summits of between 100 and 170m AOD surrounding the city (*figure 1.1.5*).

## **ECOLOGICAL SETTING**

- I.14. The major elements that define the ecological setting of Oxford are open agricultural vales to the north and south, wooded hills to the east and west and river valleys extending through the urban core of the city. This context is illustrated in *figure 1.1.6*.
- I.15. To the north and south, the city is adjoined by the flat, low lying clay vale of the Thames valley. This vale is characterised by open farmland composed of a mosaic of habitats, often including woodland, hedgerows, grassland, arable land, wetlands, ponds, ditches and streams. To the east and west, the city is bounded by the hills that form the Midvale ridge, a broad plateau of Corallian Limestone. The hills to the west are dominated by two large ancient semi-natural woodland of high ecological importance, Wytham Great Wood and Bagley Wood. Smaller ancient and recent woodlands are also important features of this area. Ancient woodland is also an important feature as part of the eastern setting of the city, related to the historic Royal Forests of Shotover and Bernwood. Many of the individual woods remaining are small fragments of the original woodland. Wood pasture, commons and heaths were historically important in this area and Shotover Hill retains a small, but important area of heathland.
- I.16. The city itself is divided into discrete wedges of urban development by the river corridors of the Thames and the Cherwell. These corridors form a continuous belt of aquatic, wetland and terrestrial habitats of high nature conservation importance,





Figure 1.1.3  
Turner's 'A view of Oxford from the Abingdon Road', 1811-1812

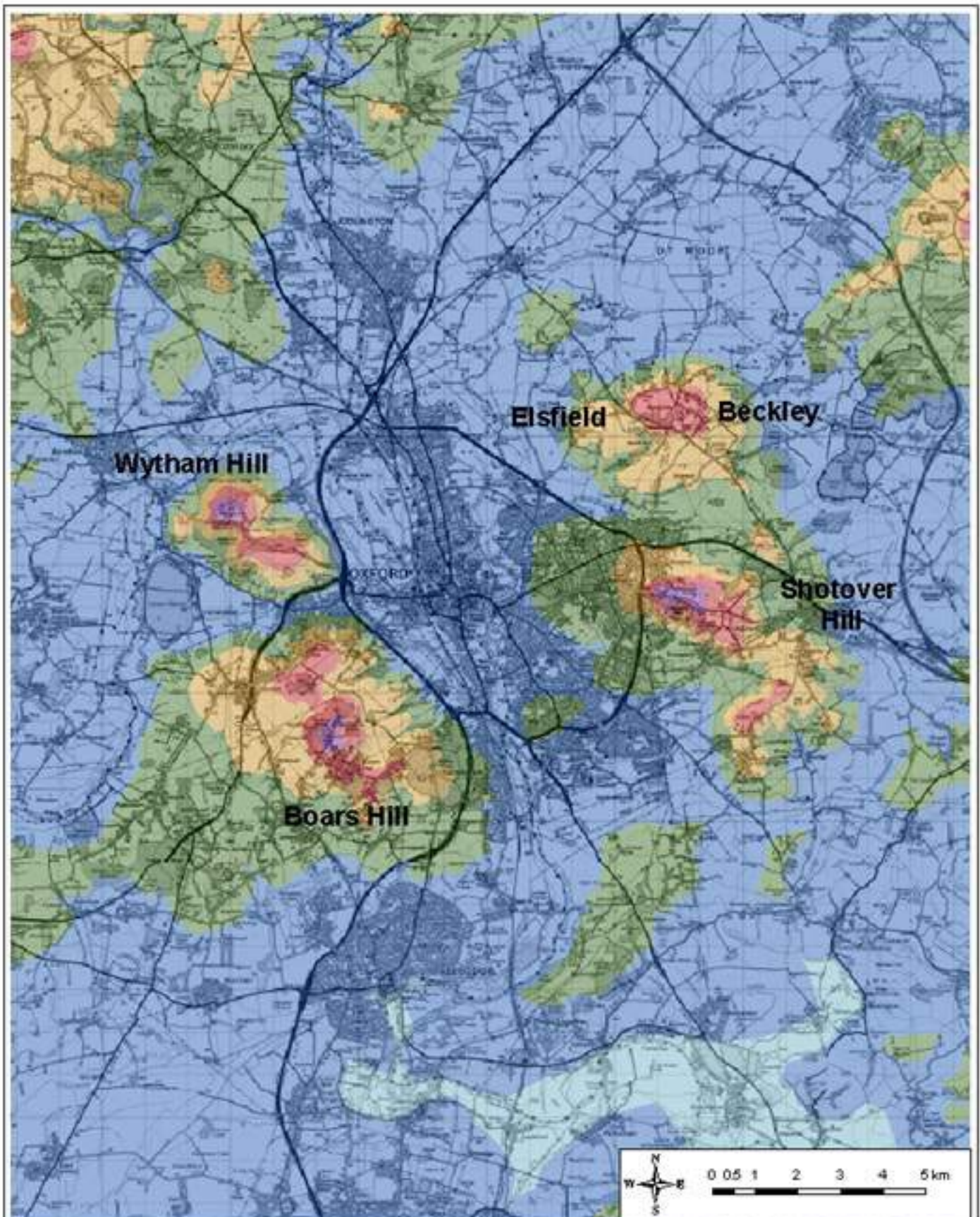
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Figure 1.1.4  
18th Century View of Oxford (Saml and Nathl. Bock) showing the prominent ridges of hills forming the skyline to the east of the city.

---





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## Oxford City Landscape Character Assessment

Figure I.1.5:  
Topographic Analysis

### Key

Elevation (m)

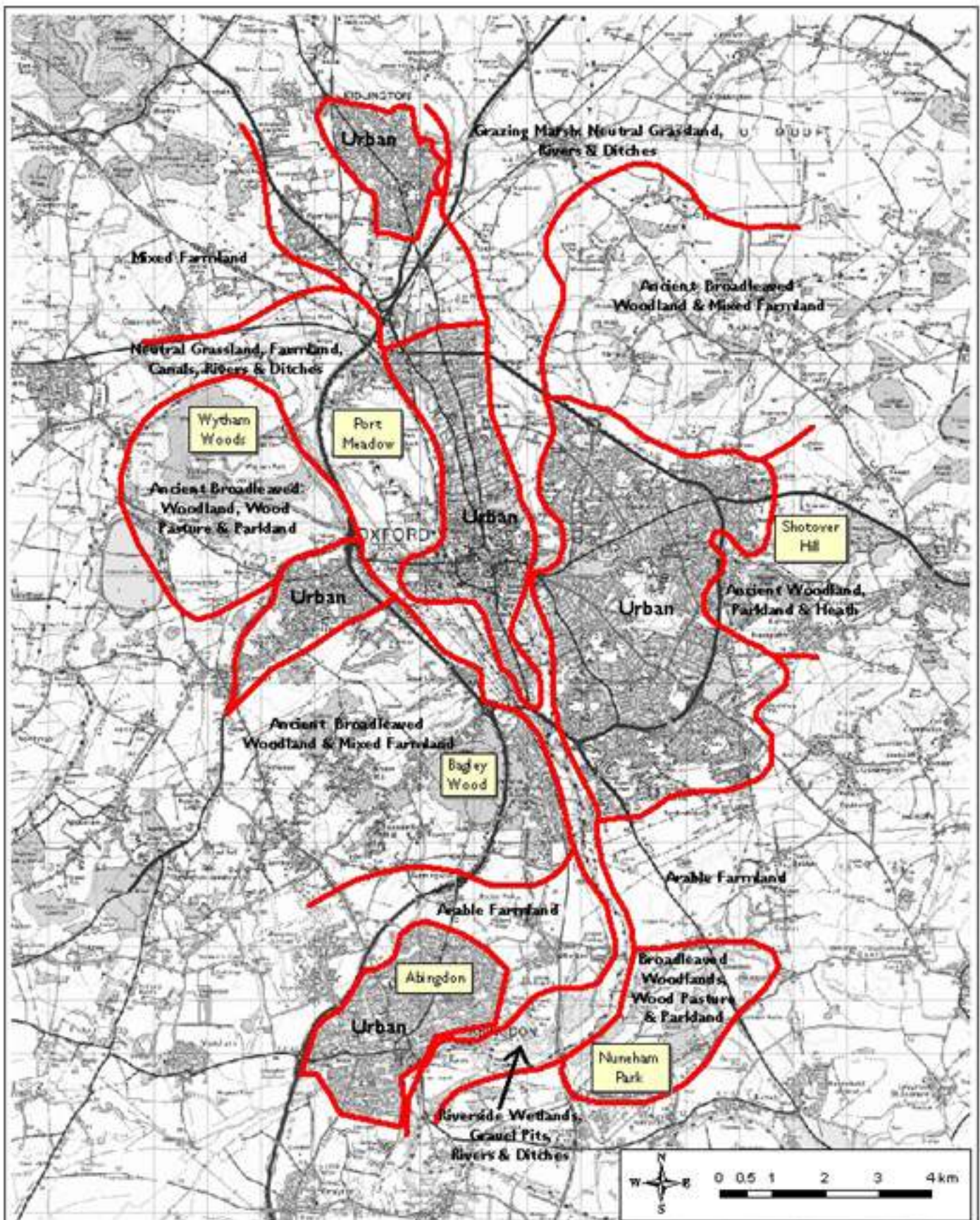
- 0 - 49
- 50 - 74
- 75 - 99
- 100 - 124
- 125 - 149
- 150 - 175

Source: OS Landform Panorama

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## Oxford City Landscape Character Assessment

Key

— Ecological character boundaries

Figure I.1.6:  
The predominant ecological character of the setting of Oxford

including internationally important wet meadows, grazing marsh, alluvial floodplain and calcareous fen. The linkage with similar rural habitats beyond the city boundaries and the continuity of management along the valleys make them an extremely important and unique feature of Oxford.

## ACCESS AND CONNECTIVITY

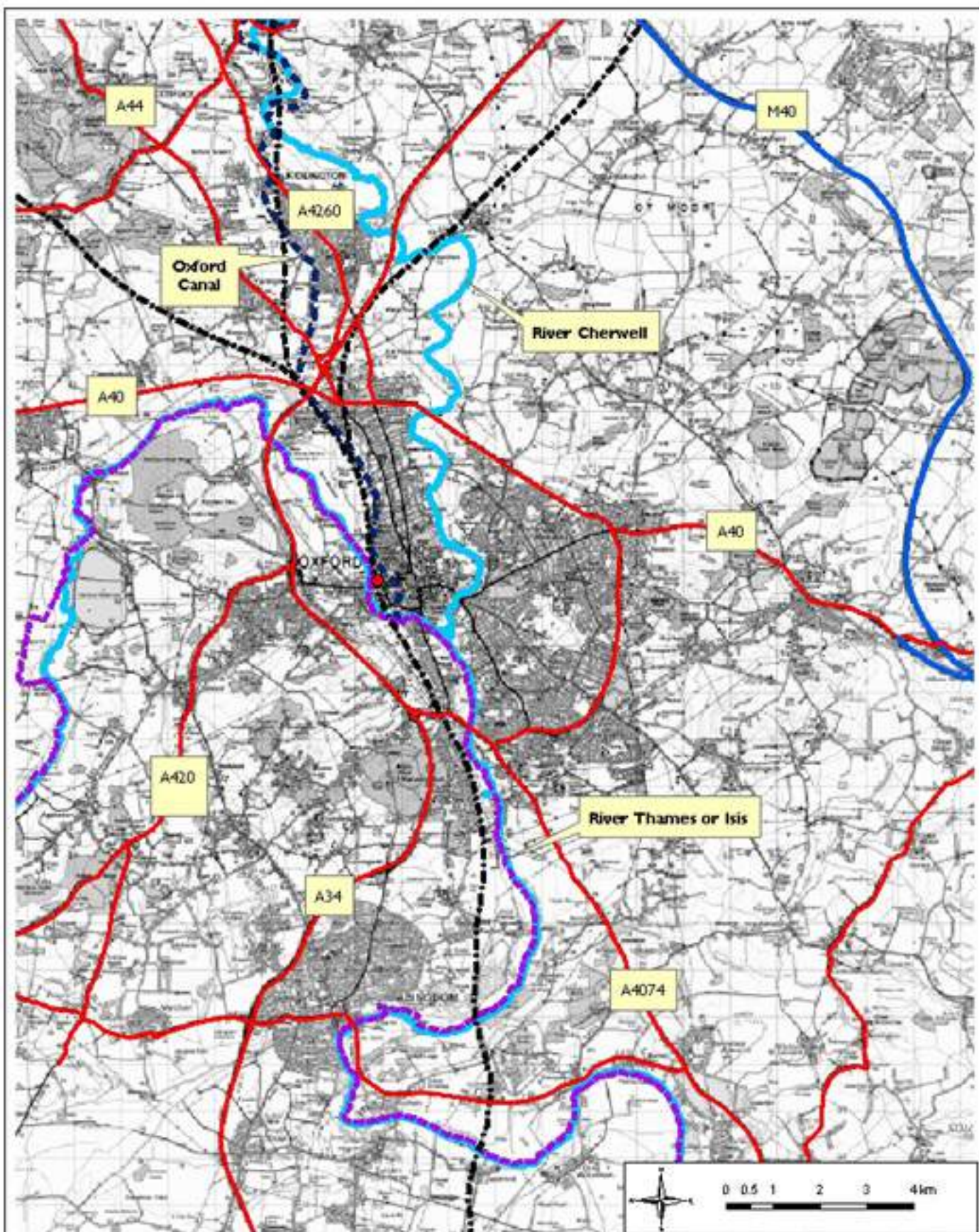
- I.17. The surroundings of Oxford have long provided a destination for excursions and there are many accounts of views to the city from the surrounding ring of hills. There are a large number of footpaths which lead out from the city, into the hills and along the river valleys (today, including the Thames Path, the only lowland National Trail area). For many walking the national trail the seamless rural environment, as it passes through Oxford, with glimpses of the built fabric beyond is one of the highlights of the route.
- I.18. The principal access and connections are illustrated in *figure 1.1.7*. The river corridor, subsequently exploited by the line of the canal and rail has been a major route through history. Today, the principal approach is by road, with the main approach via the M40(A40) or the A34. The city is encircled by the ring road, which effectively encloses the immediate setting of the city. From the ring road six main approaches converge on the historic core: Headington Road, Iffley Road, Abingdon Road, Botley Road, Woodstock Road and Banbury Road. The experience of travelling along the approach from the A34, M40(A40) and along the six main inner roads is critical in establishing present day perceptions of the setting of the city.

## VISUAL SETTING, VIEWS AND ZONE OF VISUAL INFLUENCE

- I.19. As previously noted, local character and its diversity influences the nature of views to and from the city. These views form part of the character of the city and its setting. The location of important views (both long distance open views and historic views recorded through prints and paintings) towards the distinctive Oxford skyline of spires and domes were taken as a starting point and supplemented with views identified during the visual survey to produce a number of 'view cones'. The location of these key viewpoints are shown on *figure 1.1.8* and listed below.

Viewpoint Number	Name
1	Upper Wolvercote
2	Wolvercote Bathing Place
3	A34 bridge over the Thames
4	A34 Botley interchange/A120 approach to Oxford
5	Mathew Arnold School, Cumnor Hill
6	Raleigh Park
7	Conduit House, Harcourt Hill (Turner view)
8	Hinksey Golf Course





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## Oxford City Landscape Character Assessment

Figure I.1.7:  
Principal access and connections

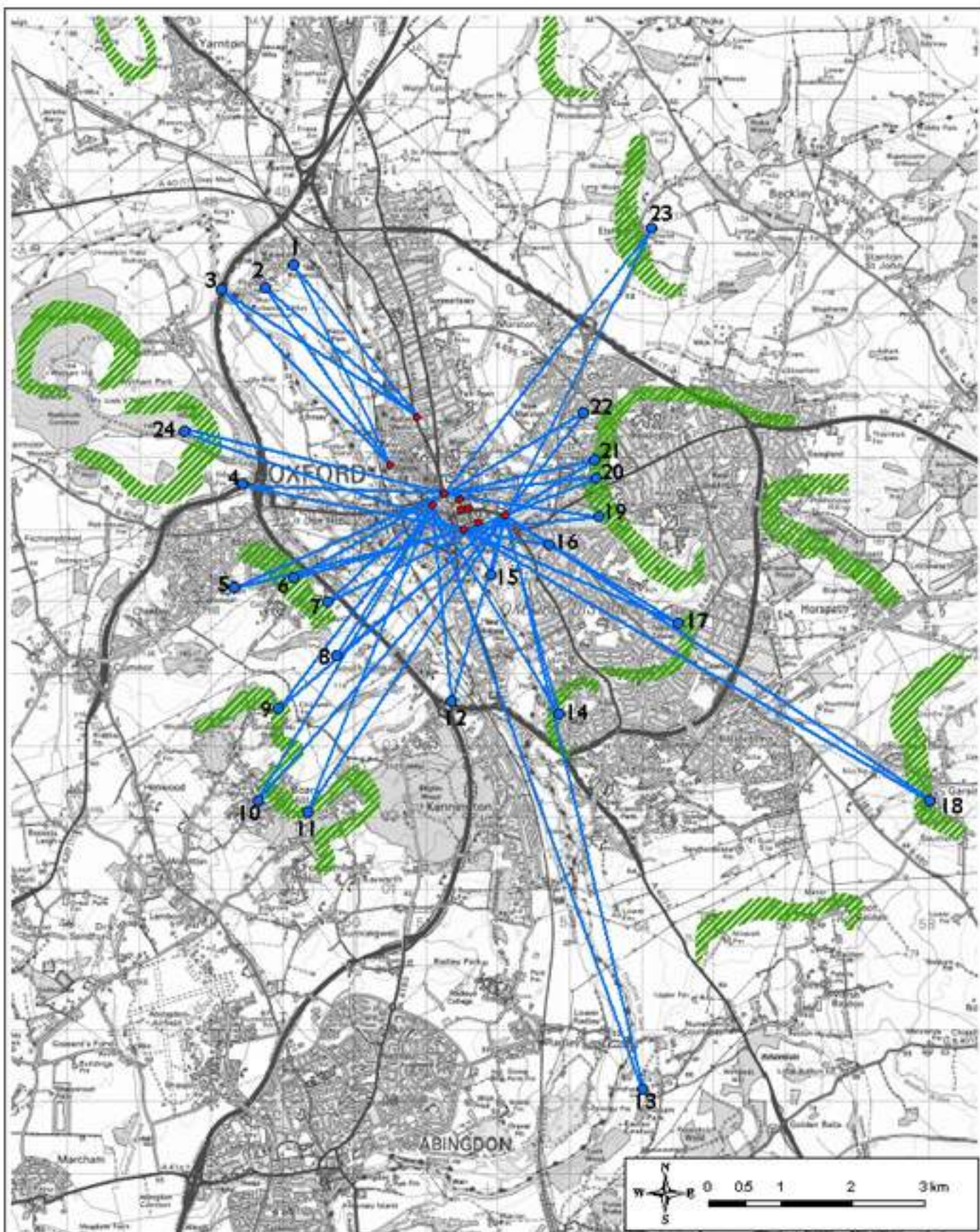
### Key

- Motorway
- A road
- - - Railway
- Oxford Railway Station
- The Thames Path
- Major river
- Canal

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## Oxford City Landscape Character Assessment

Figure I.1.8:  
Visual setting of Oxford

### Key

- Spire locations
- View points
- View cones
- ▨ Ridgeline

Drawing Number: 205702\_006\_fig1.1.8\_visualsetting

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9	Chilswell Valley
10	Jarn Mound, Old Boar's Hill
11	Boar's Hill (Turner view)
12	Hinksey Hill Flyover
13	Nuneham Park (Farrington engraving)
14	Rose Hill/Iffley
15	Christchurch Meadow
16	Cowley Road
17	Crescent Road, Temple Cowley
18	Garsington
19	South Park (Turner view)
20	Pullen's Lane
21	Headington Hill
22	Jack Straw's Lane
23	Elsfield
24	Wytham Hill (accessed only by permit)

- I.20. These views may be conserved and enhanced through management of trees that obscure views, planting of trees to obscure less attractive features and considering these views in planning the location and design of new buildings.
- I.21 Equally important in creating the distinctive character of Oxford, but less easy to record, are the views out from the urban area to the surrounding hills from the city. Prominent ridgelines have been mapped on *figure 1.1.8* to illustrate this phenomenon.
- I.22 The extent of the visual influence of the city (i.e. the area from which any part of the city can be potentially seen from) has been identified through an analysis of the Zone of Visual Influence (ZVI). The ZVI has been based on the following prominent built elements within the city:

St Mary's Church Spire	59m (198ft)
All Saint's (Lincoln College) spire	47m (153ft)
Christ Church Cathedral spire	45m (146ft)
All Soul's tower	45m (146ft)
Former SS Philip and James Church spire	44m (143ft)
Magdalen College tower	43m (140ft)

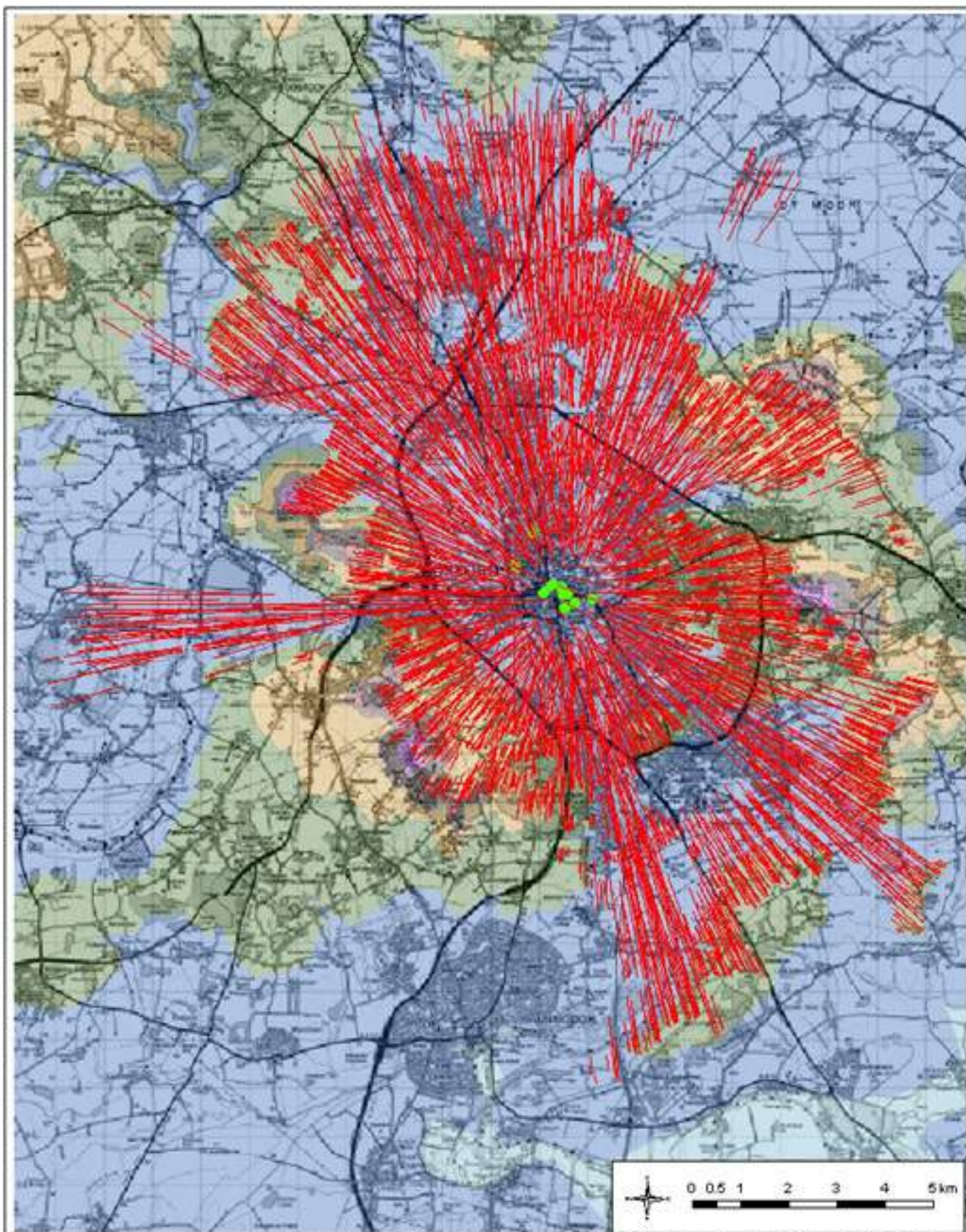
Christ Church Tom Tower	41m (133ft)
St Barnabus Church tower	41m (133ft)
Wesleyan Memorial Church tower	40m (130ft)
Radcliffe Camera	30m (100ft)
New College Tower	29m (96ft)

- I.23. The extent of the ZVI (*figure 1.1.9*), as would be expected, is very closely related to the topography, although extends much further in the lower lying floodplains to the north and south of the city. However, in reality intervening elements such as trees and vegetation will limit the extent of views and will provide seasonal change in views.

### Conclusions

- I.24. Analysis of views and identification of the ZVI has enables the setting of Oxford to be identified and the study area to be defined, establishing a broad area of study within which the setting of Oxford can be characterised. The view cones also illustrate sensitive viewpoints that should be considered in the planning of any new built development.
- I.25. The study area illustrated in *figure 1.1.10* is loosely based on the ZVI and is considered to encompass all the areas where proximity to Oxford has an influence on local landscape and townscape character and *vice versa*. However, it should be noted that this is not intended to be a definitive boundary or traceable line on the ground.
- I.26. The ZVI does not coincide with the Oxford City boundary (see *figure 1.1.10*) and therefore sections of the setting of the City of Oxford fall within other districts. This could have important policy implications for Oxford and its neighbouring districts.
- I.27. Similarly this area is not equivalent to any form of protective planning zone, beyond which it could be argued that development would not be harmful to the setting of Oxford. Indeed, there are locations, beyond the study, for example along the approach roads such as the A40 link to the M40, which are extremely sensitive and where it will be critical to conserve a rural character as the setting to Oxford.





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## Oxford City Landscape Character Assessment

### Key

- Zone of visual influence
- Spire location

### Elevation (m)

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <span style="background-color: #e0f0e0; border: 1px solid black; display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 10px;"></span> 0 - 49  | <span style="background-color: #f0e0e0; border: 1px solid black; display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 10px;"></span> 100 - 124 |
| <span style="background-color: #e0e0f0; border: 1px solid black; display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 10px;"></span> 50 - 74 | <span style="background-color: #f0e0e0; border: 1px solid black; display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 10px;"></span> 125 - 149 |
| <span style="background-color: #e0e0e0; border: 1px solid black; display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 10px;"></span> 75 - 99 | <span style="background-color: #e0e0f0; border: 1px solid black; display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 10px;"></span> 150 - 175 |

### ZVI Specifications:

Range of ZVI: 10 km

Range of Spire height: 92 to 121 m

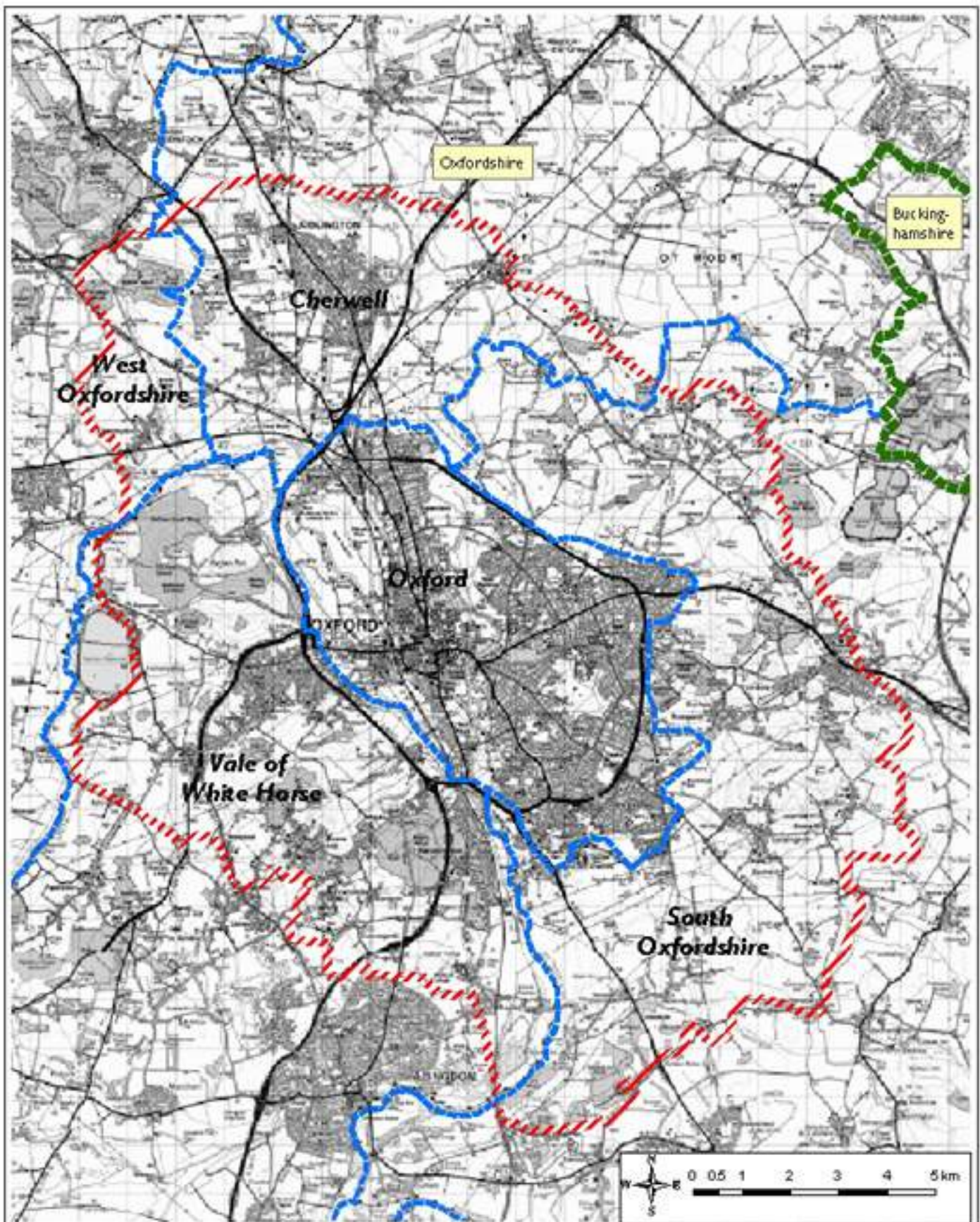
Figure I.1.9:  
Zone of Visual Influence

Drawing Number: 205701\_007\_Ag1.1.9\_scaleset1.rvt

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## Oxford City Landscape Character Assessment

### Key

- - - Study Area
- - - District boundary
- - - County boundary

Figure I.1.10:  
The Study Area

## 2. FORMATIVE INFLUENCES

---

### PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

- 2.1. Oxford and its surrounds is a palimpsest of the various influences that have, over vastly different timescales, acted upon it. The character of the landscape has evolved in response to the basic physical factors such as geology, landform and drainage that in turn influence the soils, land cover and land use of an area. The following gives an account of the physical influences on the landscape of Oxford and its surrounds.

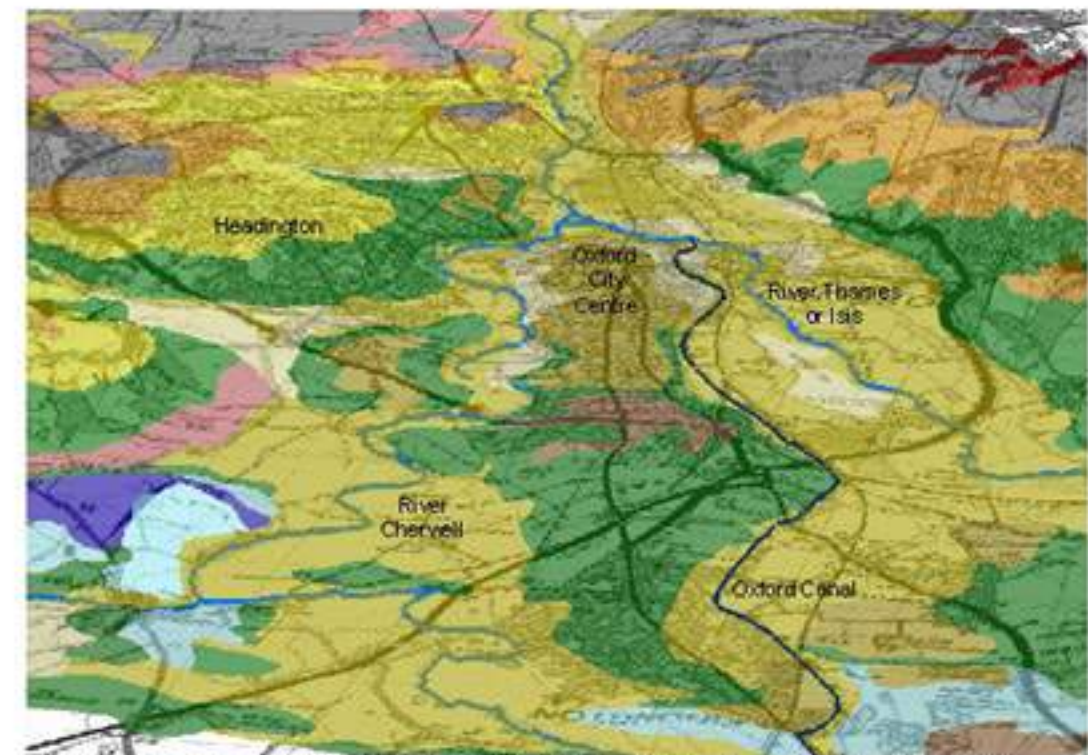
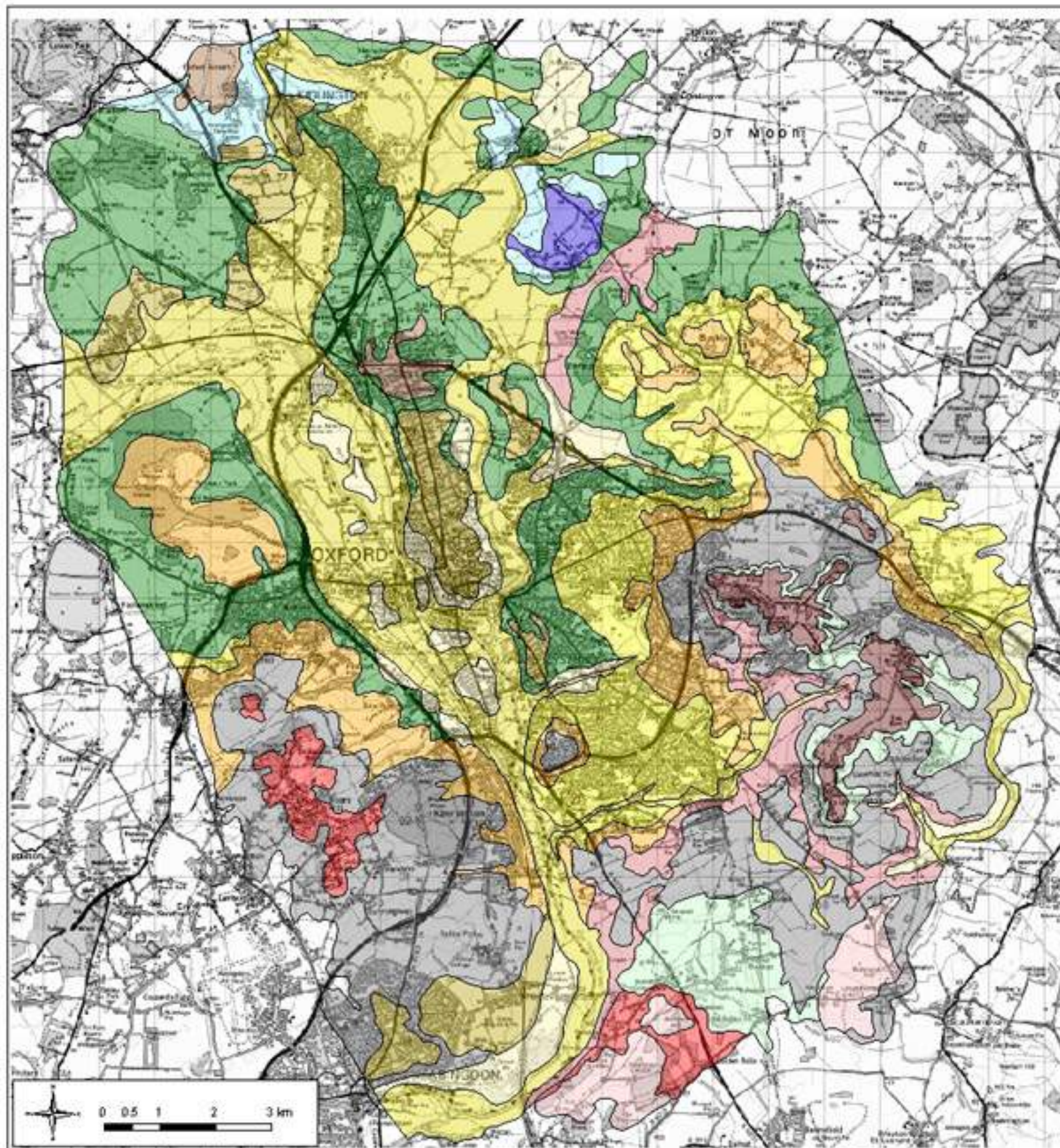
#### Geology

- 2.2. The basic structure of any landscape is formed by its underlying relief and geology. The action of weathering, erosion and deposition alter the form of the landscape, drainage and soils and in turn patterns of vegetation and land use. Oxford lies within a lowland area between the steep chalk hills of the White Horse (North Wessex Downs) and Chiltern Hills to the south and east in turn, and the north-westward rise of land leading to the Cotswolds. It is situated near the western margin of the London Platform, in the centre of a great Jurassic area. The present day landscape is also greatly influenced by drift deposits from the Quaternary period. The geological structure is illustrated in *figure 1.2.1*. The main phases of development of the landscape are outlined below.
- 2.3. **Jurassic Period:** The soft rocks underlying Oxford were formed during the Jurassic period over 130 million years ago. During the Jurassic period shallow seas covered the area. These seas were full of sediment that rivers brought down from the land and clays and sands were laid down, covering the ancient London Platform landmass with sediments. Middle Jurassic formations gave rise to the high ground between Burford and Woodstock, to the north-west of Oxford, where Cornbrash, Forest Marble and White Limestone are exposed, but it is the Upper Jurassic formations of Oxford Clay, Corallian beds and Kimmeridge Clay which dominates Oxford and its immediate setting.
- 2.4. Thick Oxford Clay, an Upper Jurassic formation, underlies the low-lying Oxford Vale. The more recently deposited Corallian beds form the escarpments of the locally prominent hills which surround Oxford to the south ie Wytham Hill, Boars Hill and Shotover Hill. These low rises of land are scarped on their north and north-western edges with gentle slopes in the opposite direction. Kimmeridge Clay, also of Upper Jurassic origin, caps the eroded surfaces of the Corallian beds, forming the prominent ridges of these uplands. The steep-sided hills have remarkably smooth and tabular surfaces, the top of Shotover, locally called 'Shotover Plain', is an excellent example of such landform.

#### **Middle Jurassic rocks in and around Oxford:**

Oxford Clay (calcareous mudstone)  
Cornbrash (rubbly limestone)  
Forest Marble (flaggy limestone)





3D visualisation of geology looking south towards Oxford, highlighting the relationship of the city to landform. Oxford city centre is located on River Terrace deposits, with a higher elevation than alluvial sediment deposits along the Cherwell and Thames / Isis floodplains.

## Oxford City Landscape Character Assessment

Figure 1.2.1:  
Geological setting of Oxford



**Upper Jurassic rocks in and around Oxford:**

Portland Limestone (sands and limestones)

Kimmeridge and Ampthill Clays (grey mudstone with limestone nodules)

Upper Corallian (coralline limestone)

Lower Corallian (calcareous sandstone)

- 2.5. **Cretaceous:** The Cretaceous period, between 135 million to 70 million years ago, was a time of intense tectonic activity in Europe. The London Platform was elevated high above sea level exposing Jurassic strata, which were extensively eroded. Subsidence of the Oxford Basin led to the area being submerged beneath a freshwater delta during which time sandy Wealden beds were deposited. An outlier of these Wealden beds remains at Shotover Hill as an isolated area of Shotover sands. With the continued subsidence of the area the freshwater lagoon was flooded with sea water. This led to the deposition of marine sediments of Lower Greensand, the remnants of which now form pockets on top of Boar's Hill and Foxcombe Hill.

**Lower Cretaceous rocks in and around Oxford:**

Gault Clay (grey mudstone)

Lower Greensand (pebbly sand)

Whitchurch Sands (including Shotover ironsands)

- 2.6. **Quaternary:** The landscape of the city of Oxford is considerably influenced by drift deposits, which overlie the solid geology. These superficial deposits fall naturally into two divisions:
- Plateau Drift - glacial deposits of reddish loam and clay, sometimes sandy, containing a great deal of pebbles and foreign debris.
  - River Gravels - bedded deposits of gravel, including material derived by erosion from the plateau drift, deposited in terraces.
- 2.7. The Plateau Drift caps some of the highest hills near Oxford, for example at Boar's Hill, Bagley Wood and Bladon Heath. These drift deposits may now be seen as isolated areas of reddish brown sandy clay with rounded quartz pebbles and quartzitic sandstones, although quartz pebbles are scattered in the fields throughout the district suggesting that ice was once extensive.
- 2.8. There was a long lapse of time between the deposition of plateau gravels and the formation of the first river terrace deposit. The oldest (fourth) river terrace, also known as the Hanborough Terrace, lies some 30 metres above present river level, a remnant of which forms the locally prominent Spring Hill, to the west of Yarnton. The third river terrace, or the Wolvercote Terrace, some 10 metres above present river level, forms an isolated platform north of Summertown. The second river terrace, or the Summertown-Radley deposit, is the most widespread of the river terraces and forms the level platform upon which central and north Oxford stand.

The flat and uniform first river terrace occurs along the edges of the floodplains of the Thames (Isis) and Cherwell. Alluvial deposits dominate the floodplains of the two rivers, producing a fertile clay floodplain, which today coincides with much of Oxford's open space.

#### **Quaternary Deposits in and around Oxford:**

Plateau Drift (glacial deposit)

Third River Terrace

Second River Terrace

First River Terrace

Alluvium

Head

### **Landform**

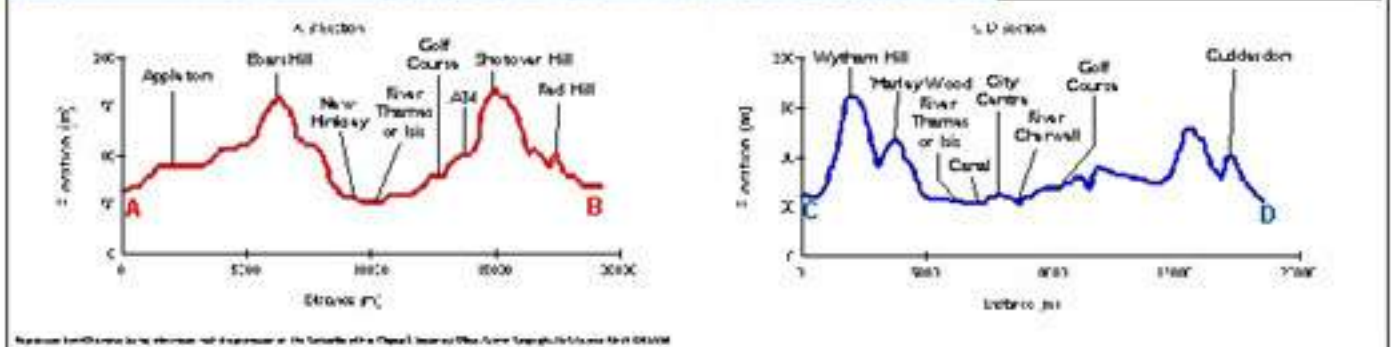
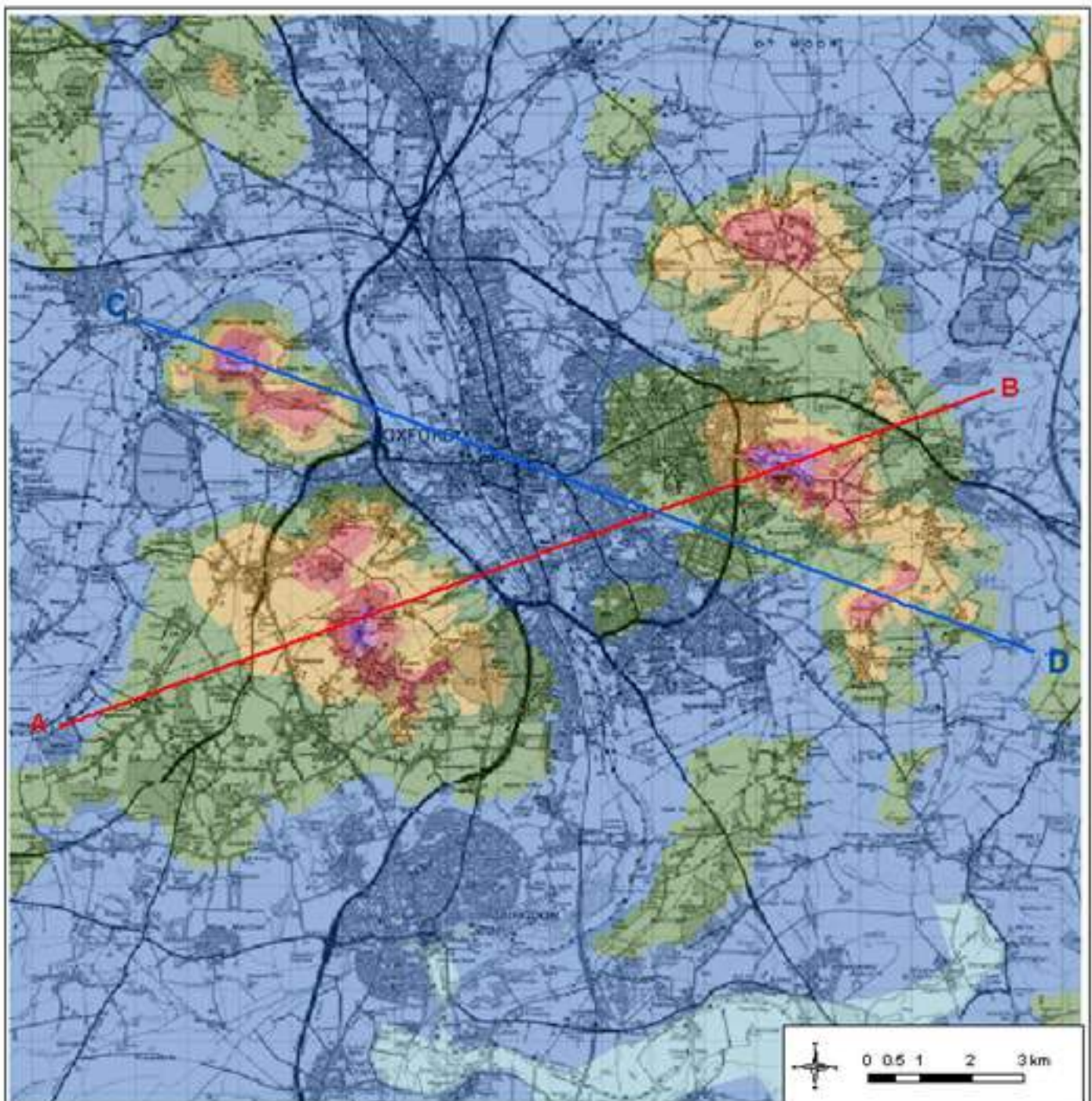
- 2.9. The topography of Oxford's landscape setting is shown in *figure 1.2.2*. The centre of Oxford is located on a river terrace between the floodplains of the Thames and Cherwell Rivers at approximately 60m AOD. The outskirts of Oxford have expanded across the floodplains onto the foothills of the encircling hills. This is particularly apparent on the east of Oxford where development has taken advantage of flat calcareous sandstone platform which lies above the Cherwell/Thames floodplain at a height of 100m AOD. A discontinuous ring of hills, reaching 170m at Shotover Plain, surrounds the whole city.

### **Drainage**

- 2.10. The drainage pattern of the area is determined by the Thames basin into which water flows. The hydrology of Oxford is shown on *figure 1.2.3*. All the waters of the upper Thames and its tributary streams, gathered from a considerable upland area including the central and northern Cotswolds, flow through the city of Oxford. The underlying clay has influenced the forms of the Thames (Isis) and Cherwell through Oxford. There are in general no steep slopes and the river therefore flows through vales rather than valleys. However, the valleys of tributary streams descending from the Oxford Heights into the Thames floodplain exhibit different forms as they pass across different geology. Those that arise from spring source at Boar's Hill cut a deep trench through the Lower Greensand before reaching Kimmeridge Clay where they almost have no valley. The valleys become quite striking ravines as they cross the Lower Corallian rocks before they open out across the Oxford Clay and Thames floodplain.

### **Climate**

- 2.11. The Upper Thames region, in the middle of which Oxford lies, may be classed in climate with the Midlands, although the east belongs to the 'continental' part of England. The rainfall is typical of the south of England in both amount and kind, reaching an average of less than 635mm (25 inches) annually. On days when the lowlands are sweltering in summer heat, the plateaux are notably cooler. During



**Oxford City Landscape Character Assessment**

**Figure 1.2.2: Topographic Analysis**


**Key**

**Elevation (m)**

- 0 - 49
- 50 - 74
- 75 - 99
- 100 - 124
- 125 - 149
- 150 - 175

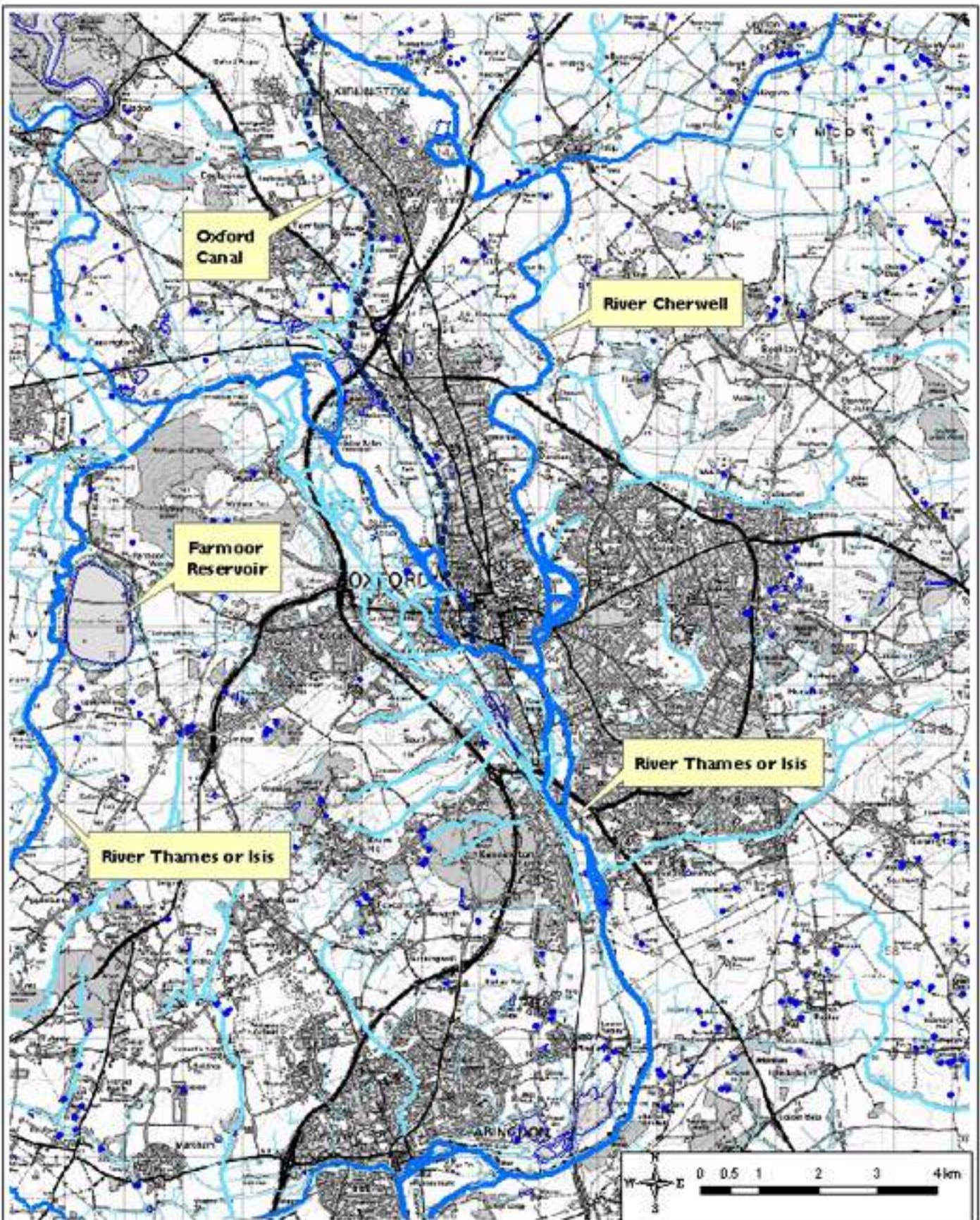
Source: OS Landform Panorama

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Drawing Number: 205700\_010\_fig1.2.2\_topographic analysis





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## Oxford City Landscape Character Assessment

Figure 1.2.3:  
Hydrology

Source: Digitised at 1:25,000

Drawing Number: 2007/01\_011\_fig 1.2.3\_hydrology

### Key

- Major River
- Secondary River
- - - - Canal
- Stream
- Ditch
- Farm Pond
- Waterbody

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clear, calm nights cooled air from the uplands drains into the valley bottoms resulting in strips of white mist appearing in the valleys at dawn. Conversely, in winter there is a contrast in climate between the clay flats and the hills and towards sundown the watercourses produce a filmy mist which hangs over the water. The low-lying fogs of the Oxford plain are common in autumn and winter and the Oxford Heights may appear as isolated summits projecting from the mist.

## ECOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT

- 2.12. The City of Oxford and its setting falls across two Natural Areas<sup>3</sup>, the Midvale Ridge and the Thames and Avon Vales. The Midvale Ridge is a band of low Corallian limestone hills stretching broadly east-west rising above the lowland clay vales of the surrounding Natural Area, The Thames and Avon Vales. Where the Midvale Ridge adjoins the city it is locally known as the Oxford Heights.
- 2.13. The City of Oxford contains an exceptional variety and quality of semi-natural habitats. It has been recognised as a Prime Biodiversity Area by English Nature because of its enormous variety of important wildlife habitats. There are twenty-four sites of national importance (SSSI) within the study area, and twelve within the City itself, as well as a high number of locally important nature conservation sites (SLINC), as illustrated on *figure 1.2.4*. Oxford supports a large area of internationally rare unimproved neutral floodplain grassland habitat, and some 266 ha are now designated for their international significance (candidate Special Area of Conservation), the sheer size and proximity of the rivers and their associated grasslands to the urban centre is a unique feature of the city. The accessibility of a wide range of habitats, within and surrounding the city to the urban population is a further special characteristic.
- 2.14. Appendix 3 contains a detailed review of all the designated wildlife sites within the city and its setting, including a note of main habitat types.
- 2.15. The most significant semi-natural habitats, as defined by Oxfordshire Habitat Action Plans (HAP), within and surrounding the city are described below. They are:
  - Grazing Marsh and Neutral Grassland
  - Broadleaved and Wet Woodland
  - Wood Pasture, Parkland and Veteran Trees
  - Canals
  - Rivers and Ditches
  - Urban Habitats (Settlements)

### Grazing Marsh and Neutral Grassland

- 2.16. Neutral grasslands, in particular seasonally flooded NVC MG4 *Alopecurus pratensis*-*Sanguisorba officinalis* meadows, occur extensively on the floodplains of the River Thames and Cherwell within the city boundaries. This grassland type is often found

---

<sup>3</sup> Natural Areas are biogeographic zones of countryside defined by English Nature, characterised by their unique combination of physical attributes, wildlife, land use and culture.



in a mosaic with drier NVC MG5 *Cynonsurus cristatus*-*Centurea nigra* grassland and other grassland types. There is no traditional grazing marsh in Oxford, although the inundation grassland of the lowest part of Port Meadow could be considered a derelict grazing marshland.

- 2.17. Neutral grassland habitats occur on the common land within and surrounding the built fabric. They have a long management history, often either continuous grazing or a summer cut for hay, followed by aftermath grazing and very different botanical communities have developed under these two different management regimes. Oxford City and its immediate surroundings provide a significant proportion of the UK resource of neutral grassland meadow with the majority of this resource designated SLINC or SSSI. The key sites of Port Meadow, Wolvercote Meadow, Pixey and Yarnton Mead are part of the Oxford Meadows candidate Special Area of Conservation (cSAC), representing sites of European nature conservation significance.

<b>Key sites within Oxford City supporting Neutral grassland</b>	<b>Character Area</b>
Port Meadow	9A Thames (Isis – North)
Wolvercote Common and Green; Wolvercote Meadows	9A Thames (Isis – North); 3H Upper Wolvercote
Christchurch Meadow	9D Thames (Isis – South)
Iffley Meadows	9D Thames (Isis – South)
New Marsdon Meadows	10D Marston; 9B Cherwell; 10D St. Clements; 5F New Marston
Hook Meadow and the Trap Grounds	9A Thames (Isis – North)
Magdalan Meadow	3J Headington Quarry
St Hilda’s College Meadow	4D East Oxford
Oxford Bus Station Playing Field	5M Cowley Marsh
Botley Mead (Osney Mead)	9E Grandpont
Godstow Bridge and Godstow Abbey Meadows	9A Thames (Isis – North)
Long Meadow	9D Thames (Isis – South)

<b>Key neutral grassland sites surrounding Oxford City</b>
Pixey and Yarnton Mead
Rushy Meadows
Cassington Meadows

### **Broad-Leaved and Wet Woodland**

- 2.18. Oxford supports three major types of broad leaved woodland, Ash-maple woodland, oak woodland and wet woodland. Ash-maple woodland (NVC W8) is the most common type of woodland on base-rich soils, concentrated on the limestone of the Midvale ridge. Oak woods (NVC W10) are more common on neutral, or base poor, soils and are often found in close association with Ash-maple woods. Wet Woodlands (NVC W1-W5) are not a common type of woodland within the city and are most frequently small sites, associated with river floodplains and streamsides.



- 2.19. Oxford City does not contain a large broad leaved woodland resource, with only 29 ha recorded in 1995, all in woodlands less than 10 ha in size (Oxfordshire Biodiversity Action Plan, 2000), although some of these sites e.g. Magdalen wood and Lye Valley, are respectively, important areas of ancient woodland and wet woodland of high conservation value. The immediate surroundings of the city contain a number of important sites of ancient woodland, especially on the Midvale Ridge, notably Wytham Woods and Brasenose Woods.

<b>Key sites within Oxford City supporting Broadleaved woodland</b>	<b>Character Area</b>
Brasenose Wood and Shotover Hill	6B Wood Farm
Oriel Wood (Bartlemas Wood)	7B Southfield Park and Hospitals complex 4D East Oxford
Lye Valley	7B Southfield Park and Hospitals complex
Magdalen Wood	6B Wood Farm
Lye Valley	7B Southfield Park and Hospitals complex
Godstow Holt	9A Thames (Isis- North)
Medley Manor Wood	9A Thames (Isis- North)
Victoria Arms Spinney	9B Cherwell

<b>Key Broad leaved woodland sites surrounding Oxford City</b>
Wytham Woods
Brasenose Wood and Shotover Hill
Stanton Great Wood
Woodeaton Wood
Holton Wood
Holly Wood
Cothill Fen

### **Wood Pasture, Parkland and Veteran Trees**

- 2.20. Parks and wood pasture are historic and cultural landscapes that often support veteran trees; trees of considerable age where the process of decay has created niches for a variety of highly specialised and often scarce organisms, including invertebrates, bats, fungi and lower plants. The UK is recognised as supporting a large proportion of the veteran trees in Europe.
- 2.21. A number of public parks within Oxford contain populations of veteran trees, most notably Shotover Country Park, University Parks, Christchurch Deer Park and South Park, Headington. In addition, an unknown number of veteran trees occur within the public space and private gardens associated with older parts of the city, such as around Wood Farm.

<b>Key sites within Oxford City supporting Wood pasture, Parkland and Veteran trees</b>	<b>Character Area</b>
Brasenose Wood and Shotover Hill	6B Wood Farm
University Parks	2A University Fringe
South Park	4H Headington Hill

<b>Key Wood Pasture, Parkland and Veteran tree sites surrounding Oxford City</b>
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