

Statement of Significance

The **Statement of Significance** defines the natural beauty of the High Weald AONB, its character and the special qualities we associate with it. It provides the criteria against which impacts on this nationally designated landscape can be judged.



Time depth and objective analysis³³ has defined the High Weald AONB as characterised by dispersed historic settlement, ancient routeways, an abundance of ancient woodland, wooded heaths and shaws, and small irregularly shaped fields. These are all draped over a deeply incised and ridged landform of clays and sandstones with numerous gill streams, and are closely related to socio-economic characteristics that have roots extending deep into history.

The essential character of the High Weald was established by the 14th century and has survived major historical events, and social and technological changes. It is considered to be one of the best surviving coherent medieval landscapes in Northern Europe. This fundamental and largely immutable character is the essence of the natural beauty of the AONB and the AONB Management Plan is structured around the five key components of this character:

- **Geology, landform, water systems and climate:** deeply incised, ridged and faulted landform of clays and sandstone. The ridges tend east-west, and from them spring numerous gill streams that form the headwaters of rivers. Wide river valleys dominate the eastern part of the AONB. The landform and water systems are subject to, and influence, a local variant of the British sub-oceanic climate.
- **Settlement:** dispersed historic settlements of farmsteads and hamlets, and late medieval villages founded on trade and non-agricultural rural industries.
- **Routeways:** ancient routeways (now roads, tracks and paths) in the form of ridge-top roads and a dense system of radiating droveways. These routeways are often narrow, deeply sunken, and edged with trees, hedges, wildflower-rich verges and boundary banks.
- **Woodland:** the great extent of ancient woods, gills, and shaws in small holdings, the value of which is inextricably linked to long-term management.
- **Field and heath:** small, irregularly shaped and productive fields often bounded by (and forming a mosaic with) hedgerows and small woodlands, and typically used for livestock grazing; small holdings; and a non-dominant agriculture; within which can be found distinctive zones of heaths and inned river valleys.

These fundamental components of character of the High Weald AONB are enriched by locally distinctive and nationally important details. These include castles, abbeys, historic parks and gardens; hop gardens and orchards; oast houses and parish churches; veteran trees, a rich and varied biodiversity, and local populations of key threatened species.

People value the scenic beauty of the landscape: its ancientness and sense of history around every corner enhanced by the rich array of appealing historic buildings and wonderful views. They appreciate the dark skies; enjoy the relative sense of tranquility and intimacy that this human scale landscape provides; the ability to get out and about through myriad public rights of ways and the opportunities to get close to nature.

³³ Roland B. Harris, 'The Making of the High Weald' (2004)