117. Avon Vales

National Character
Area profile:
Summary

This is an undulating, low-lying landscape of mixed, predominantly pastoral agriculture and small limestone-built towns, cut by the (Bristol) River Avon and its tributaries, and surrounded to the west, south and east by higher land. Woodlands lie on the steeper slopes and by watercourses, and in a few other areas within a structured farmland of medium to large fields and now straggly hedgerows. It is more than 80 per cent agricultural (both arable and pasture, with some localised nurseries and market gardening) and less than 10 per cent urban, but from the late 20th century onwards it has been subject to much development. There is evidence of Saxon occupation in the many ‘–ham’ place names, and there are prehistoric hill forts, with extensive areas of ridge and furrow that indicate medieval arable cultivation. This area still reveals its past role in broadcloth production and trade in its fine late medieval churches and merchants’ houses in market towns and in its many stream-side mills. Smaller settlements and farmsteads are clustered along streams and lesser rivers, linked by narrow winding lanes. Ancient patterns of flood meadows and drainage ditches dominate these valley floors, with their wet grasslands and woodlands. Flooding affects many communities in this National Character Area (NCA), and the opportunities to restore wetland habitats within river corridors to alleviate problems with water flow and to aid climate change mitigation will be important ecosystem services here, to add to food provision and cultural services.

Large historic parks and mansions, such as Bowood and Lacock, which often still feature major woodlands, enrich the landscape and historical context and provide much local recreational resource, to the benefit of the local economy. The same can be said of the towns such as Malmesbury and Frome, with their historic and attractive town centres.

Less than 5 per cent of the land here is designated for any purpose. This 5 per cent is mostly accounted for by the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in the north-west and the 17 Sites of Special Scientific Interest, a slight majority of which are of geological interest. The NCA is crossed by a wide communications corridor running broadly from east to west; most of the major settlements are clustered along this corridor. This was initially reliant on water routes, namely the (Bristol) River Avon and the Kennet and Avon Canal, as well as the Great West Road, now the A4. Now the M4 motorway and Isambard Kingdom Brunel’s Great Western Railway, link London and the West Country and have spread wide the travel-to-work net.

This area can be easily overlooked, surrounded as it is by the high-quality designated landscapes of Cotswolds AONB and North Wessex Downs AONB, but it has a restful and undramatic charm of its own.
**Statements of Environmental Opportunity**

- **SEO 1:** Protect, manage and enhance the semi-natural habitats, including the pastoral waterside landscape of permanent pasture and wet grassland, calcareous and neutral grasslands, and (as site appropriate) ponds, and investigate and pursue opportunities to create such habitats, to increase resilience to climate change, reduce soil erosion and provide benefits to the water environment and biodiversity in general.

- **SEO 2:** Protect, manage and enhance the area’s woodlands and parklands for their rich ecological, historical and archaeological resource, to foster a sense of place and to provide benefits to wildlife, and work to establish appropriate access, thus enhancing cultural, health and recreational benefits for local residents.

- **SEO 3:** Plan for the creation of new landscapes associated with the expansion of towns such as Chippenham, Melksham and Trowbridge, while incorporating the existing landscape features into green infrastructure planning. This will serve the interests of local landscape character, access and recreation, biomass provision, biodiversity and water flow regulation.

- **SEO 4:** Protect and manage the varied rural landscape of small urban areas amid gently rolling arable and pasture, and thick hedges interspersed with small woods, securing wide-ranging views, reinforcing landscape character, preventing soil erosion, promoting sense of place and tranquillity, and providing recreational benefits.
Key characteristics

- An undulating clay vale with a mix of arable and pasture.
- Small- and medium-sized fields with mostly hedgerow boundaries with few hedgerow trees, varying in shape from irregular piecemeal enclosure to rectilinear planned enclosure.
- Numerous low ridges with local views over towns and villages.
- Wide River Avon corridor, with an ancient pattern of flood meadows and closely associated settlements and more recent development.
- Transport corridors along roads and watercourses, heavily influential on all development in the NCA.
- Large historic parks and mansions, often established from former monastic establishments.
- Attractive stone-built centres to market towns that reflect the former agricultural productivity and wealth of the area.
- Wide views across whole area from higher areas of surrounding chalk downs.