

# Northamptonshire Vales/ Leicestershire Vales

Character Area

89/94



This description is an amalgamation of 89 Northamptonshire Vales and 94 Leicestershire Vales

## Key Characteristics

- Gentle clay ridges and valleys with little woodland and strong patterns of Tudor and parliamentary enclosure.
- Distinctive river valleys of Soar, Welland and Nene with flat floodplains and gravel terraces.
- Large towns of Leicester and Northampton dominate much of the landscape.
- Frequent small towns and large villages, often characterised by red brick buildings.
- Prominent parks and country houses.
- Frequent imposing, spired churches.
- Attractive stone buildings in older village centres and eastern towns and villages.
- Great diversity of landscape and settlement pattern with many sub units, eg Nene Valley and Welland Valley.

## Landscape Character

This large, complex and heterogeneous area comprises low-lying clay vales and river valleys extending between wold landscapes and other areas of higher ground, including the area referred to as High Cross Plateau in Warwickshire. In the north, the Leicestershire and South Derbyshire Coalfield and Charnwood rise quite steeply from the low-lying land west of Leicester. To the north-west there is a more gradual transition to the flat, glacial till dominated, edge of the Mease/Sence Lowlands, while to the south of this there is an equally gradual transition to Dunsmore and Feldon. The Vales narrow south eastwards with the Northamptonshire Clay Uplands to the south and High Leicestershire to the north. The Welland valley extends north eastwards as part of the area while, to the south, the Vales sweep between the Northamptonshire Uplands and

Rockingham Forest to the Nene Valley, which is sharply defined on its southern bank by the Cambridge and Bedfordshire Claylands.

The gently undulating clay vales and ridges which make up much of the area, have a strong pattern of Tudor and parliamentary enclosure, often with low, but well-maintained, hedges and variable densities of hedgerow trees. Woodlands are small. They are confined mainly to valley sides areas and to copses and spinneys on the ridges. As a result of this open character, the frequent large settlements can dominate the landscape. Leicester and Northampton are large towns with extensive edges of commercial and retail buildings and out of town development and there are several smaller towns like Market Harborough, Lutterworth, Hinckley and Earl Shilton where the high density of 19th and 20th century red brick houses and urban fringe buildings are prominent. There are also many large villages but the frequent small ones show less 20th century influence. This is particularly true in the east, where an older character of mellow brick, and fine stone churches in some of the most celebrated English stones, is present. Even when the landscape is not influenced by prominent built up edges, settlements are never very far away and the church towers and spires are the most characteristic feature of rural areas.



DAVID BURTON/COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY

A gently undulating landscape retaining reasonably good hedgerow structure in a largely arable area. Dingley Church is in the background.

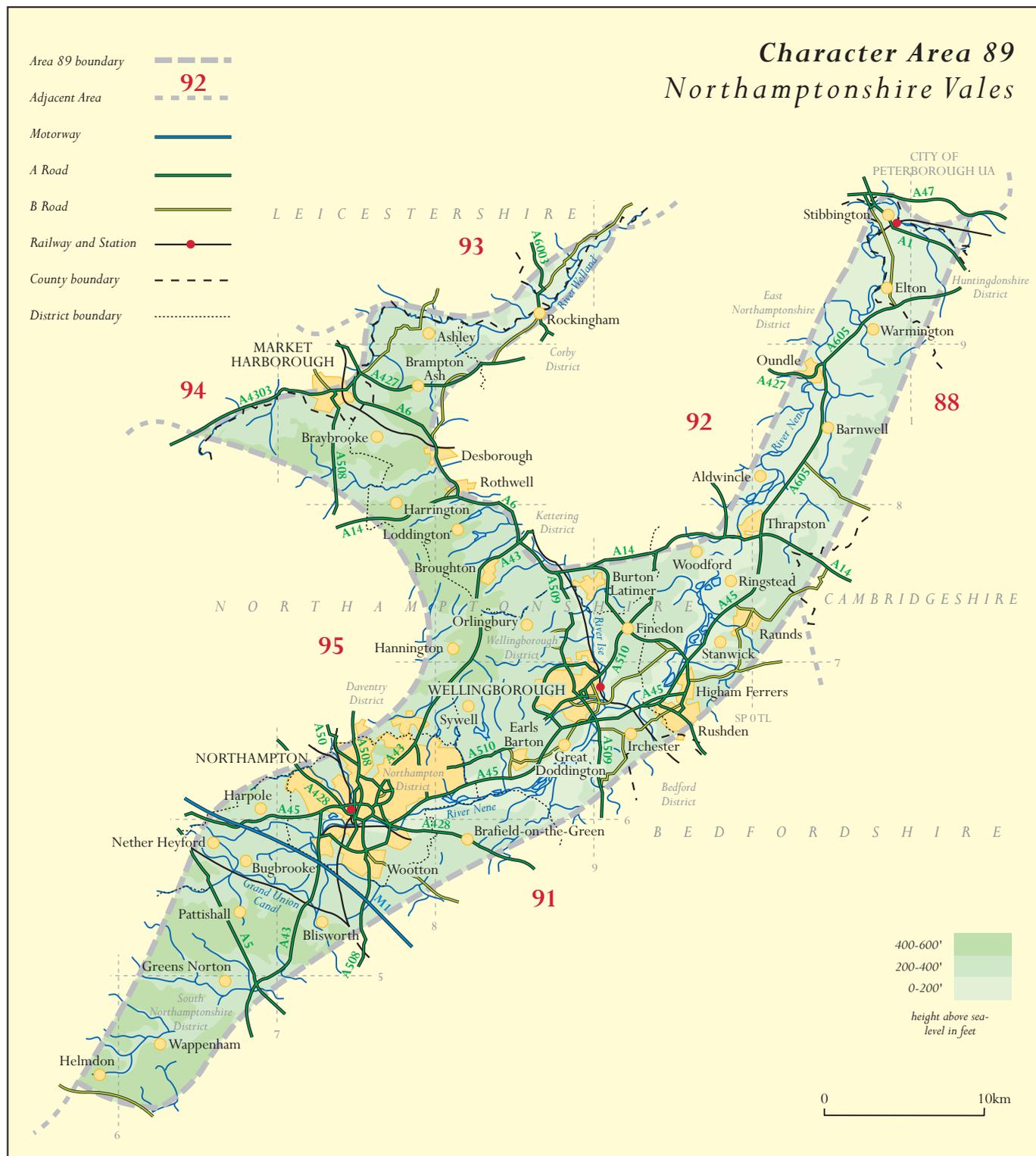


The river valleys of the Soar, Welland and Nene are much larger-scale landforms than the clay vales forming the hinterland of this area. They have wide, flat floodplains on which an older landscape of meadows, willow pollards and alders survives. There are frequent settlements, usually on the edges of the valleys just off the gravel terraces. Each valley is very different in character.

The Nene has well-defined terraces which are the sites of many ancient settlements and it is fed by numerous tributaries forming side valleys. Much of the floodplain is now dominated by either active gravel working or the lakes formed on former workings and is crossed by willow-lined

causeway roads. However, north of Ringstead the landscape is unaffected by the gravel industry and the flood plain has meadows of high nature-conservation interest. Rising out of the floodplain, the land is in both arable and pasture use and there are bluffs on the valley sides which are dominated by the rectilinear pattern of parliamentary enclosure. There are frequent villages, predominantly in local limestone, along the valley and they usually have linear layouts. There is high historic interest at places like Oundle and the often spectacular churches like Fotheringhay.

The Welland valley is narrower and more remote, the main industrial influence being the views of Ketton cement

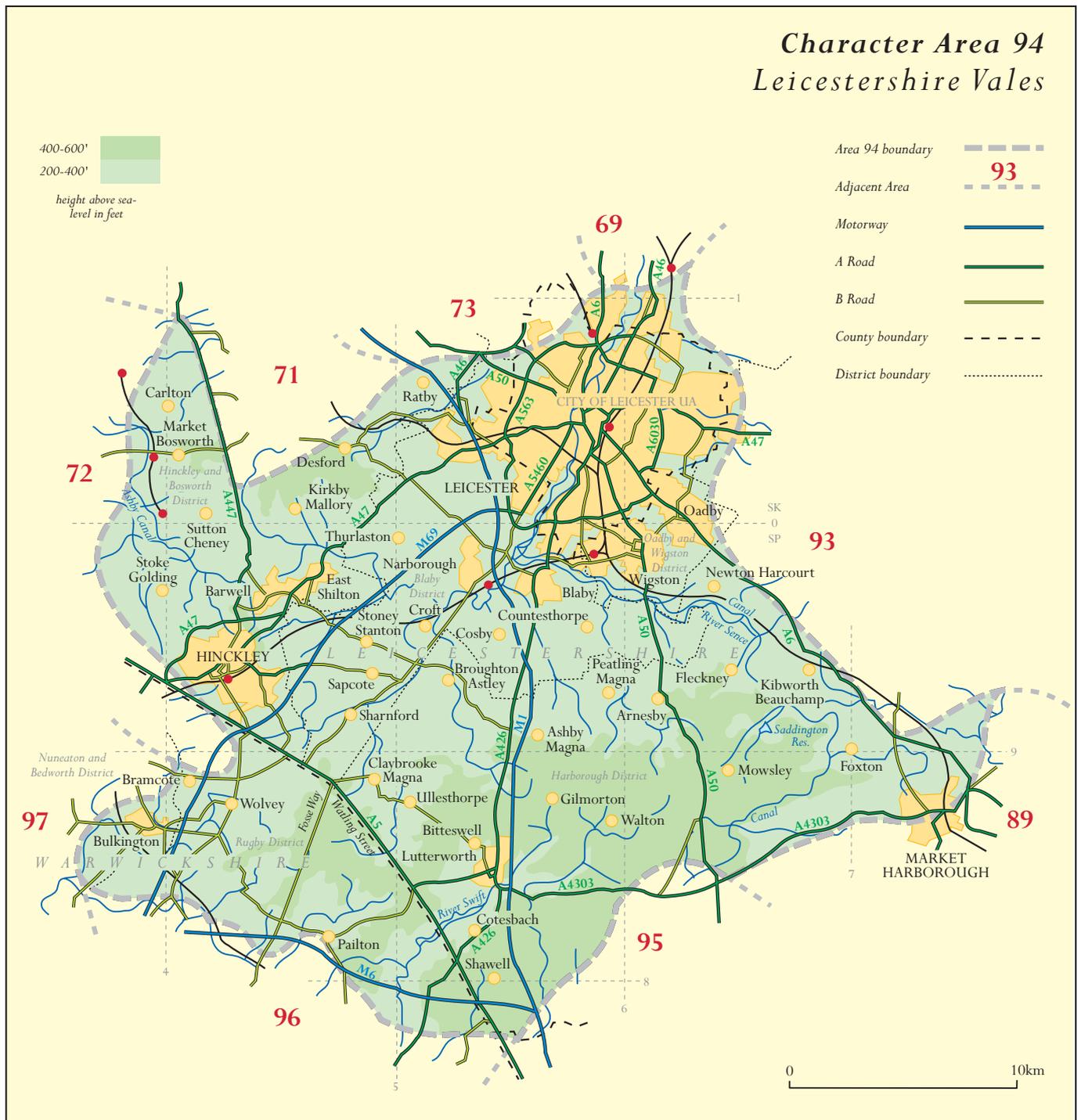


works to the north. The scarp at the edge of Rockingham Forest is a dominant feature and the generally open character is punctuated by waterside trees. On the narrow valley bottom, meadows are frequent but there has been much conversion to arable in recent years and the overall character is remote and rural. As in the Nene valley, there are many fine stone buildings with Ketton Stone and ironstone tending to predominate.

The Soar valley is dominated by urban development spreading from Leicester. Tree cover is often low and locally negligible and there are large- to medium-size fields. The larger villages, as well as Leicester, dominate this open landscape and features like pylons can be very conspicuous. Further upstream, the hedgerow and hedge cover improves and the urban influence

diminishes. In the south, the Ise Valley is in part dominated by the settlements of Wellingborough and Kettering,

However, while it is easy to break the area down into its component parts, there are common qualities and features which unify it and which stem from its long occupation, strategic location and natural resources. In a fairly uniform and sometimes rather bland sequence of landforms, individual character often comes from views of the surrounding higher ground. The landscape is rich in attractive individual settlements and buildings of historic interest and there are very few parts where a village is not in view. Parks, waterside trees and meadows are common themes and the extensive settlements reflect prosperity from a variety of sources over many centuries.





DAVID BURTON/COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY

The area is variable in land use and the survival of features. Peatling Magna in Leicestershire is typical in being largely built from red brick. It is surrounded by a mixture of arable and pasture land which continues to retain a reasonable amount of its hedgerow and hedgerow trees.

### Physical Influences

The western part of this large and complex area is underlain by the Mercia Mudstones. East of the river Soar, these strata are overlain by Rhaetic mudstones and limestones which do not form a significant scarp. To the east, the Lower Lias mudstones form an extensive area overlain by thick deposits of boulder clay (glacial till) which begin to thin out to the east, exposing the Middle and Upper Lias which emerge beyond Husbands Bosworth. To the east of the Northamptonshire Clay Wolds, the younger, harder rocks of the Inferior Oolite extend south-west to north-west through Northampton and Corby, juxtaposed with outcrops of the Great Oolite and Cornbrash along the Nene Valley.

The area is dominated by the major rivers of the Soar, Welland and Nene. Gravel, alluvial and head deposits along these rivers have been one of the major determinants of settlement patterns and later industry. The Soar is fed by the Wreake in the north-west, flowing between the higher ground of the Wolds and High Leicestershire, and by the Sence in the south-east. The slightly higher ground around Market Harborough, effectively a low outlying part of the Wolds landscapes to the north and south, separates the Soar from the Welland catchment. Higher ground on the Northamptonshire Clay Wolds - Rockingham Forest axis divides the Welland from the Nene valley, where the extensive northern catchment is fed by large streams and small rivers, including the Ise.

### Historical and Cultural Influences

The river valleys were a focus of settlement from at least Neolithic times and had become extensively settled by the Bronze Age. Air photographs of the gravel terraces of the Soar, Welland and particularly the Nene have shown areas

thick with Bronze Age occupation and ritual sites and the valleys have probably been frequently settled ever since. The surrounding land, however, was less densely occupied in prehistory, particularly Leicestershire west of the Soar. By the Iron Age, much of the better land had been cleared and there was a regular system of land division with major settlement sites along all three main valleys.

Dense occupation of the valleys continued in the Roman period, with a major Roman centre at Leicester, and pottery manufactured in the Nene valley was widely used throughout southern England. The Roman roads of the Fosse Way, Gartree Road and Watling Street form features which are still prominent in the present day landscape and villas clustered around centres like Towcester. The Anglo Saxons took over a landscape that had been substantially cleared of woodland, except in west Leicestershire and furthest from the river valleys, and their *tons* and *hams/hamms* still dominate the placenames of the area. Indeed, the present-day pattern of compact parish boundaries in areas like the Nene valley reflects some of the Saxon estates. Away from the river valleys, however, settlement was less dense, and a scattering of Scandinavian settlements become established in the 9th century, particularly in the thick boulder clay of Leicestershire west of the Soar. As the population expanded, the landscape, particularly of the river valleys, came to be dominated by frequent nucleated villages surrounded by open fields. At strategic sites along the valleys, like Earls Barton, Northampton and Fotheringhay, castles marked the major centres.



NENE VALLEY PROJECT

Barnes Meadow, a riverside nature reserve on the Nene close to the edge of Northampton.

The prosperity of much of the area in the Middle Ages is most obvious in the large churches and church spires, often within sight of one another, supporting the saying that Northamptonshire is a county of 'spires and squires'. The present major towns - Leicester and Northampton - were significant Viking settlements, expanding rapidly up to the 14th century, but important minor towns like Oundle, Market Harborough, and Lutterworth also owe their origin to the pre-Conquest period.

From the 15th century onwards there was piecemeal enclosure of the open fields but much of the landscape remained unenclosed until the 18th and 19th centuries. Landscape parks with grand houses were developed between the 17th and 19th centuries and at this time many of the area's fine manor houses were constructed and villages were rebuilt in local stone.

The 18th and 19th centuries saw the rapid growth of Leicester and Northampton as red brick-dominated residential and manufacturing centres in which the boot and shoe industry and the iron and steel industry in Northampton and Kettering played a major part. The eastern part of the area, hitherto the least densely populated and most backward, became a centre of brick, hosiery and engineering, and the brick-built large villages or small towns like Blaby and Hinckley rapidly developed. The Grand Union Canal, linking the Nene and the Trent, was a substantial stimulus to growth.

In the 20th century the settlements of Northampton and Leicester continued to expand, absorbing the surrounding villages. Wellingborough and Kettering developed as substantial towns and there has been large-scale mineral extraction. Ironstone has been won in the east of the area, particularly around the edges of Rockingham Forest and sand and gravel have been extensively excavated, particularly along the Nene creating a new wetland landscape. Major new roads, notably the M1 and A14 have also had a significant effect.

### Buildings and Settlement

In the village and town centres, and to some extent in the small towns in the eastern part of the area, the older buildings are constructed in an attractive range of local stones. Along the Nene valley for instance, Oundle is largely a limestone town, and the unforgettable extravagant Fotheringhay church is also of the creamy grey stone. Radiating out from the quarries at Barnack in the Soke of Peterborough and Collyweston on the edge of the area, Barnack Stone and Collyweston Slates can sometimes be seen while, to the north-east, Ketton Stone which is one of the purest oolitic limestones has been used. Westwards along the Welland, extending down the Nene valley and into Leicestershire, ironstone varying in colour from deep orange to tawny brown can be found. Further west, but also in places like Market Harborough, timber framed buildings still survive. However, in the west generally and in the eastern towns, brick predominates and varies from a light, almost orangey colour, to the deep red of Leicester detested by W G Hoskins and Clifton Taylor.

The two principal towns have spread along their respective river valleys. They have substantial edges of out of town retail centres and light industrial units, with an outer ring

of enlarged villages. Billing Aquadrome is particularly prominent on the edge of Northampton. Kettering and Wellingborough which dominate the Ise valley and Hinckley on the edge of the Sence Lowlands, are medium-sized modern towns but Lutterworth, Market Harborough and Oundle have retained the older character of market towns. Large villages are frequent and many are still dominated by 19th and early 20th century brick buildings. They are linked by a dense network of minor roads.

The area is rich in individual buildings of interest, from the remarkable turriform Anglo-Saxon tower church of Earls Barton to the eclectic Victoriana of Overstone Park. As well as late medieval buildings like Kirby Muxloe Castle there are many fine 17th and 18th century manor houses like Dallington Hall, often set within their own parkland. Groups of estate cottages and estate villages near the big houses are evidence of the power of Northamptonshire squires.



A Northamptonshire village scene, showing typical red brick and tile construction. Retention of open space is important in maintaining village character.

### Land Cover

In addition to the areas in urban residential, commercial and industrial use, the warehouses and commercial buildings on the edges of the major towns and trunk roads are a significant land use. Along the river valleys there is extensive surface water resulting from gravel extraction. Woodland cover is generally sparse, except intermittently along the Welland and Nene valleys. There are small valley side ash-maple woodlands and spinneys and copses on the ridges and more undulating land. Parks are quite frequent, often lying at the edge of the area adjacent to more woodland landscapes.

However, despite the urban areas, most of the land is a mixture of arable and pasture use. There is considerable variety in the distribution and extent of hedgerow and tree cover and density of hedgerows. On some of the valley floodplains, like parts of the Welland, there are substantial waterside trees and meadows, but generally the flatter areas are given over to arable where hedgerows can be low, broken or intermittent, for example around Dingley. On

the slopes of the many minor valleys, and on more undulating ground generally, pasture in small fields tends to predominate.

### The Changing Countryside

- Tree cover in recent years has been substantially affected by Dutch Elm disease and ash die back.
- There has been substantial development of large edge-of-town buildings and new roads which can be intrusive in what is often a very open landscape.
- High density residential development at the edges of villages and towns is often very intrusive and there can be a lack of vegetation to absorb new development.
- The gravel extraction industry has created lakes and gravel wetlands of high wildfowl interest.
- The mitigation measures for gravel extraction sites do not always suit the landscape well - planting of vigorous poplar cultivars in particular is often unsuitable although older plantations of poplar for the match industry are now a feature of the landscape. There is continued pressure for general extraction.
- Continued conversion to arable will increase the openness of the landscape and endanger the remaining areas of ridge and furrow.
- Riverside meadows and riverside trees are under threat from gravel extraction and neglect.
- In some areas hedgerow management has been neglected.
- The loss of floodplains to gravel extraction has major archaeological and historic landscape implications.

### Shaping the Future

- The Nene Valley offers scope to address a full range of broad environmental matters, including the conflict between gravel extraction, development, wildlife conservation and recreation.
- Parkland is an important element in the landscape.
- The large-scale nature of recent developments should be addressed through equally large-scale landscaping measures.
- Many villages would benefit from local design initiatives to ensure that future change is appropriate to local character.

- There are many opportunities for the improved management of restored sand and gravel workings and for future restoration to take account of current best practice for nature conservation and the landscape.
- The loss of hedgerow trees and the ageing present stock indicate the need for substantial new planting.
- Over fifty pocket parks have been established in Northampton in partial compensation for the lack of accessible countryside and common land. This approach is important.



NENE VALLEY PROJECT

The large towns of Northampton (pictured here) and Leicester dominate much of the landscape. Both continue to expand into surrounding countryside.

### Selected References

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### Glossary

*cultivars*: a plant variety that has arisen in cultivation