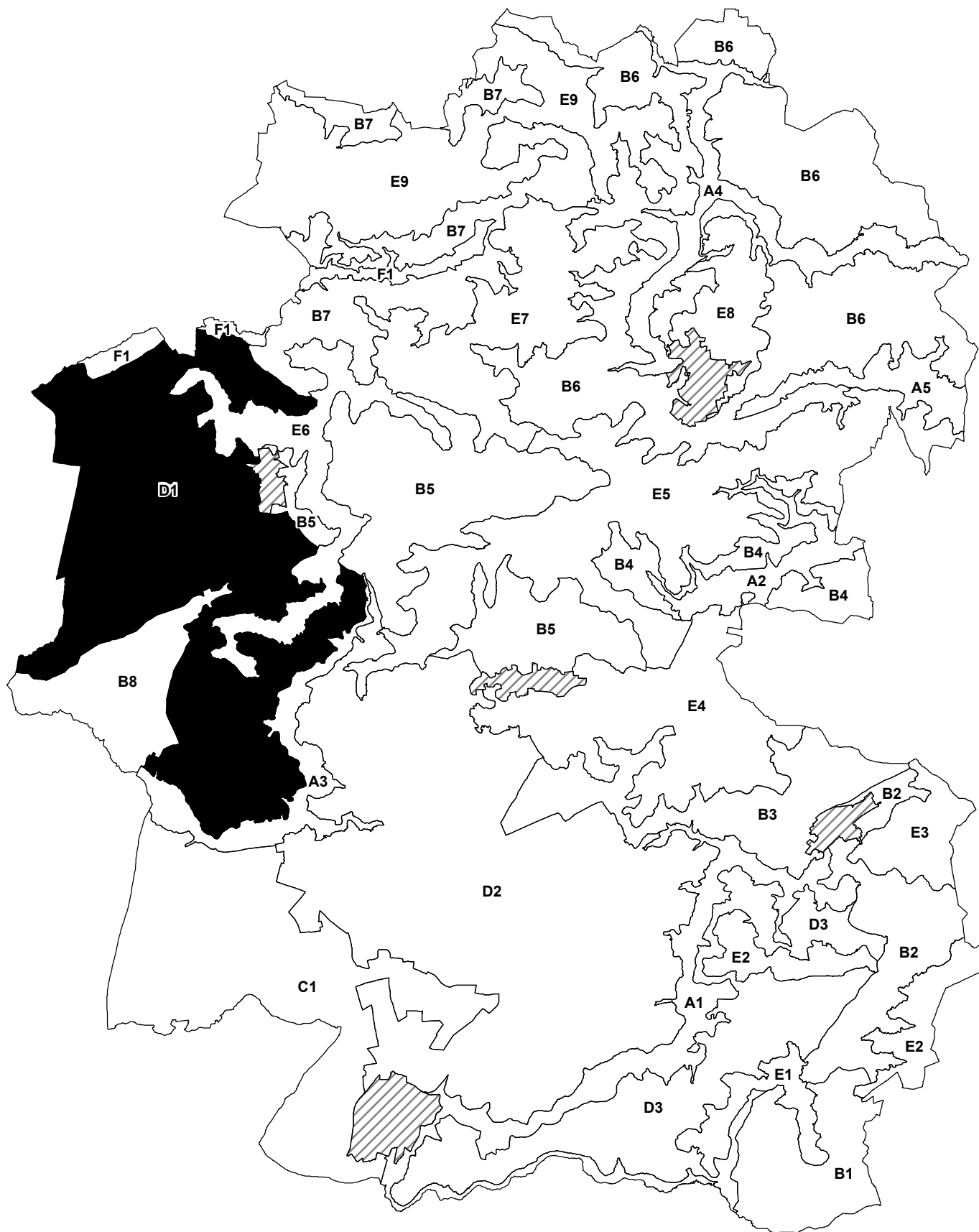


DI: SWAFFHAM HEATH



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Location and Boundaries

DI.1 A large area of the *Breckland Heathland with Plantation* landscape type located to the north-west, west and south west of Swaffham, with character defined primarily by the land use of arable farmland, historic parklands and plantation woodland and distinctive Scot's pine belts. To the north the character area boundary is marked by the adjacent *River Nar* character area and to the west by the district boundary and a change in character to a more settled area of farmland and plantations. To the south and east the landform falls towards the River Wissey.

Key Characteristics

- Drift deposits of sand, clay and gravel create a gently undulating landscape, with topography ranging from 10-70m AOD across the character area.
- Free draining sandy soils support the functional land cover of arable cultivation, pig farming and plantation woodland.
- Ancient, contorted scots pine shelterbelts and screening belts of trees provide shelter to the easily eroded brown soils and are a prominent landscape feature.
- At Cockleycley Heath and Swaffham Heath, the woodland plantation blocks create a visually prominent feature in the landscape.
- The large scale arable fields are delineated by hedgerows in variable condition from occasional species rich intact hedgerows with hedgerow trees, thorn hedges and pine lines.
- Breckland Farmland SSSI covers a large part of the character area – the cultivated land proving a habitat for stone curlew. A smaller area of Breckland Forest SSSI also covers part of the area.
- A large scale landscape, with an open, windswept character, quiet and seemingly remote in places.
- Historic parklands and parkland features such as lodge houses, rides/long vistas and parkland species are evident in the landscape.
- Sparsely populated - the settlement pattern is characterised by scattered Halls, farm buildings and a small number of nucleated villages and hamlets. Churches are often isolated.
- Distinctive building materials of knapped flint, clunch and brick
- The areas of open access land associated with plantations at Swaffham Heath and Coldharbour Wood provide opportunities for recreation.

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER DESCRIPTION

Physical/Natural

- D1.2 The character area has an underlying solid chalk geology and a gently undulating plateau landform covered by a thin layer of glacial drift deposits including boulder clay and sands and gravels. The covering of drift deposits is shallower than in adjacent landscape character areas resulting in complex soils typically sandy free draining mixes of chalk, sand, silt, clay and flints.
- D1.3 The light, droughty soils are prone to wind erosion. The geology and soils are reflected in the species composition of the woodland blocks, with pine being the main species. The blocks of plantation woodland and coniferous shelter belts have protected the soil from erosion and has allowed much of the landscape to be given over to arable production. In addition to arable cultivation, a number of areas are used for outdoor pig raising.
- D1.4 Significant areas of the character area are covered by nature conservation designations, representing its ecological value. Large blocks of the character area are designated as part of Breckland Farmland SSSI (SPA), with the arable farmland notable for supporting almost half the stone curlews in Britain, nesting in the cultivated land favouring the areas of bare ground and very short vegetation. The majority of the Breckland Forest SSSI (SPA) lies outside of the character area, but plantation woodland at Cockleycley Heath and Swaffham Heath are parts of the SSSI. Gooderstone Warren is designated as a SPA.
- D1.5 Field enclosure is provided by hedgerows of various condition and species composition. Historic, contorted scots pine wind breaks form a strong vertical feature in the flat landscape, as are localised areas of hedges of fast growing coniferous species. The grassy banks and field edges are very important to the conservation of the remnant Breckland grass-heath habitats.
- D1.6 The entire character area falls within the 'Core Area' as defined by the Ecological Mapping Project for Norfolk. Core areas represent significant concentrations of high quality extant habitat. The high quality habitat represented within character area D1 is Breckland Forest and area of remnant heath.

Historic Character

- D1.7 Faden's 1797 Map of Norfolk identifies extensive areas of heathland and common within the character area, including Beachamwell Warren and Swaffham Heath. At this time it was an exposed open landscape. These areas have now largely been planted for commercial forestry and partly absorbed within arable cultivation. The HLC data (which is partially complete for the area) shows that the three most significant influences to be piecemeal parliamentary enclosure, 18th-20th century plantation woodland, and 20th century enclosure, some with resultant boundary loss. The landscape today, is one of medium to large sized fields often being bounded by 'gappy' and degraded hedgerows.
- D1.8 Plantations form significant blocks in two areas at Cockleycley Heath and Swaffham Heath. Conifer planting began in 1922 on areas of heath, and unstable sand dunes and marginal agriculture. The majority of the initial plantings reached the end of

their first rotation in the mid 1970s. Since then the harvesting of these and subsequent plantings has created a continuous supply of clear-felled areas and young plantations.

- DI.9 A number of parklands both extant and remnant signify the past wealth of this part of Breckland, notably the Historic Park and Garden at Pickenham Hall and the former estate of the now destroyed Didlington Hall. Various parkland elements are visible within the character area, such as the vista to Cockleycley Hall.

Settlement and Built Character

- DI.10 This is a sparsely settled landscape with a remote 'empty' quality in places. Settlement is characterised by a small number of nucleated villages generally located in proximity to and drawing on the resources of the intervening river valleys, as at Narborough (River Nar), Hilborough (River Wissey) and Cockley Cley (Gadder). In addition, there is a general pattern of dispersed farmsteads across the character area. The local vernacular is red/yellow brick and flint with occasional colour rendered buildings.

Perceptual/Visual

- DI.11 This is a large scale landscape with a strong geometry – with large regular fields defined by straight rows of Scot's pine or thorn hedges, interspersed with areas of conifer plantation. In places this creates a very open, exposed and windswept landscape. There is a relatively low density of woodland blocks, although where they do exist, they are large in scale and create a notable feature within the landscape.
- DI.12 Views both within the character area and to adjacent character areas are variable. In places views are distant, to the wooded skylines, to the elevated *North Pickenham Plateau* and to the *Wissey Valley*. However in other locations views are framed or contained by woodland blocks.
- DI.13 The low population density and the large swathes of farmland and woodland create a peaceful, even remote landscape. Views to the wind turbines north of Swaffham in the *North Pickenham Plateau* character area add a sense of movement and activity. Some noise disturbance from RAF Marham (within the adjoining Borough of Kings Lynn and West Norfolk) is apparent.

EVALUATION

Positive Landscape Features of Significance and Inherent Landscape Sensitivities

- The historic boundary features - distinctive scots pine windbreaks and hedgerows;
- Remnant parkland features such as vistas to Cockleycley Hall, flint estate walls and lodge houses which provide a sense of historical integrity;
- The varied landcover mosaic created by the plantation woodland and farmland;
- Sparse settlement and rural character of the hamlets and villages;

- The narrow, often unmarked rural lanes and tracks;
- The ecological value of the arable farmland for birds, notably stone curlew;
- Areas of remnant heathland character.

Visual Sensitivities

DI.14 A predominantly an open large scale landscape with long, open views. Within the more enclosed wooded areas vistas which were designed into the landscape as parkland features, have in places been retained. These views create surprise historical markers within the landscape and would be sensitive to unsympathetic woodland management.

DI.15 The woodland blocks create an important focus to the landscape, particularly where views are across arable fields to woodland blocks on the skyline.

Current State of the Landscape

DI.16 This is a functional managed landscape with an eroding character in places due to loss of characteristic elements, notably heathland, degraded field boundaries, and changes in farming. The arable farmland provides a valuable habitat for farmland birds.

Landscape Change

Past Change

- Agricultural enclosure and loss of heathland, plus further loss of heathland with decline in grazing;
- Conversion of parkland and heath/commons to plantation woodland;
- Declining condition of remaining areas of parkland;
- Agricultural changes including outdoor pig raising and development of water storage reservoirs on agricultural land.
- Decline of distinctive Scot's pine hedgerows;
- An increasing influence of traffic upon the landscape character with the inclusion and widening of the A47, A1122 and A1065.

Future Change

DI.17 Potential future landscape change may result from the implementation of agri-environment schemes and management to enhance ecological value. Changes in Forestry Enterprise Strategy, including heathland restoration and renewal may also have a positive effect on landscape character.

LANDSCAPE STRATEGY

The landscape strategy should be to conserve the remote, open, sparsely settled character of the *Heathland with Plantation* landscape– restoring and enhancing the heathland character where appropriate and managing the arable farmland to enhance its ecological value, particularly for farmland birds.

Guidelines

Landscape Management

- Encourage take up of agri-environment schemes to improve the ecological value of arable farmland and to create habitat connectivity;
- Conserve and enhance the historic contorted pine wind break hedgerows through appropriate a management;
- Consider opportunities for heathland creation on areas where it has been lost, for example areas of plantation woodland;
- Ensure that any further recreation provision does not conflict with the sensitive species and habitats within the Breckland Farmland and Breckland Forest SSSI;
- Conserve the rides within parklands and plantations which provide attractive vistas to historic features, including those designated as Historic Parks and Gardens.

Development Guidelines

- Conserve the sparse settlement pattern of small villages associated with the edges of river valley and scattered farms;
- Ensure that any new built development fits with the local built vernacular, including use of materials (brick and flint);
- Conserve the existing rural road network, resisting traffic pressures and traffic calming measures which could have an urbanising influence;
- Consider the effect of tall or vertical structures within this very open, exposed landscape.

