

Welland Valley Landscape Character Area

Key Characteristics

- Gently meandering river in wide and shallow valley
- Little tree cover
- Pasture on the floodplains
- Arable farming on the valley sides
- Market Harborough, operating as a traditional market town, is the dominant urban influence

General Description

The Welland Valley character area, is well defined in terms of topography and location, but has a number of landscape characteristics similar to the other character areas, particularly in and around the environs of Kibworth, in the centre of the District. The character area follows the wide shallow valley of the River Welland, which flows from west to east through Market Harborough. The River Welland itself forms the boundary between Leicestershire and Northamptonshire.

The area is mainly a mix of medium sized agricultural fields enclosed by mixed hedgerows with some evidence of hedgerow removal. There is little established woodland with most mature planting following the water courses. The area has extensive views across the valley but is enclosed by ridges of higher land from the adjoining character areas particularly to the north.

Topography

The topography of the Welland Valley is that of a wide flat river valley with sloping, shallow valley sides that stretch to the steeper ridges to the north which form the boundaries to adjacent character areas; High Leicestershire and the Laughton Hills. The character area covers the central valley to either side of the River Welland and runs to the base of slope of the ridges, at approximately 70 m AOD.

Geology

The main geology grouping of the Welland Valley is Jurassic Middle Lias.

Vegetation

The Welland Valley has little in the way of established woodland; the majority of mature vegetation is concentrated around the watercourses and disused rail line in the form of scattered copses of trees. Common species of trees in the area are ash, oak and field maple with some willows that follow the path of the River Welland in small cluster groups towards the east.

The mature hedgerows in the area mainly consist of hawthorn with some field maple and dog rose. There is evidence of hedgerow removal to create larger sized fields to allow modern arable farming practices.

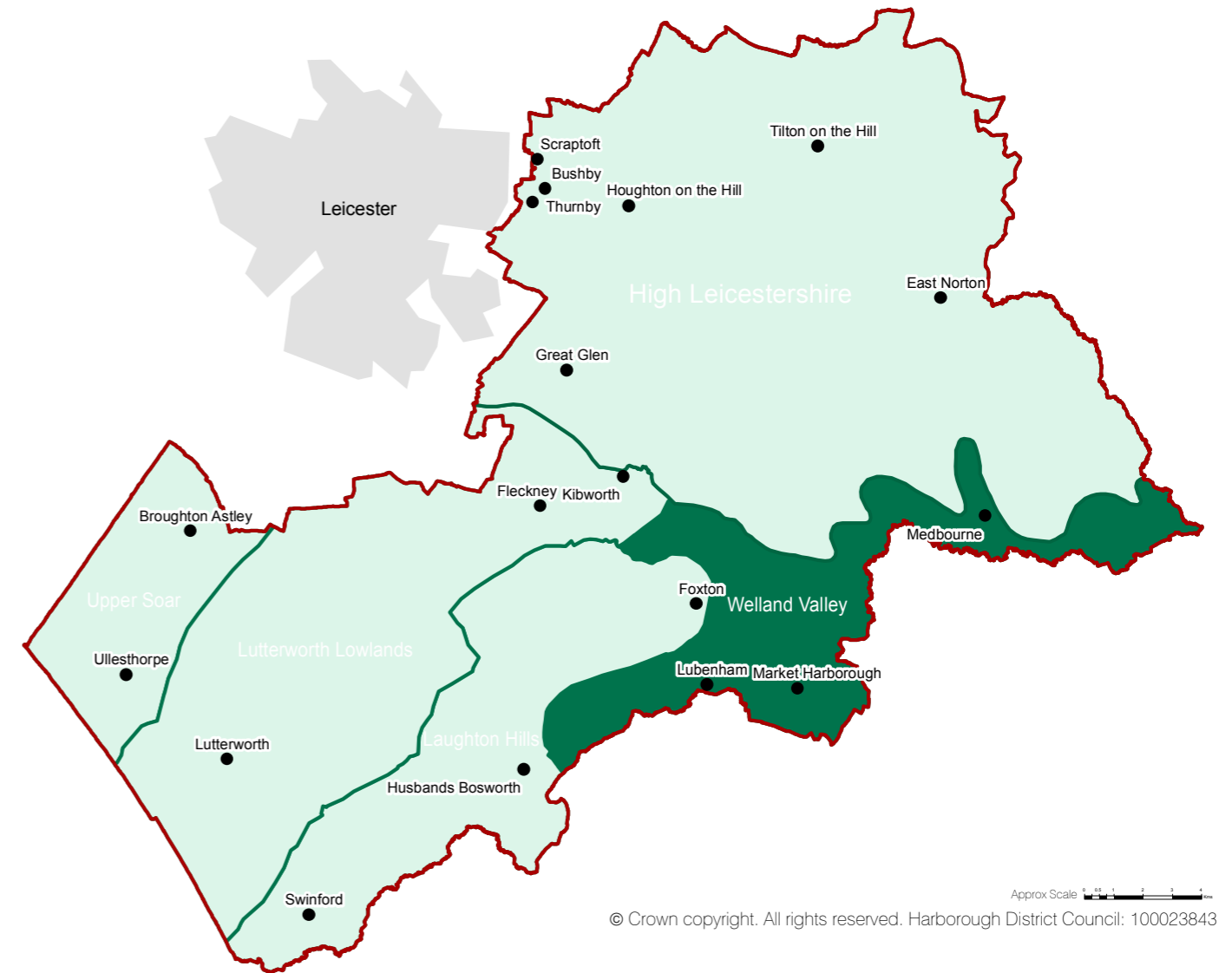
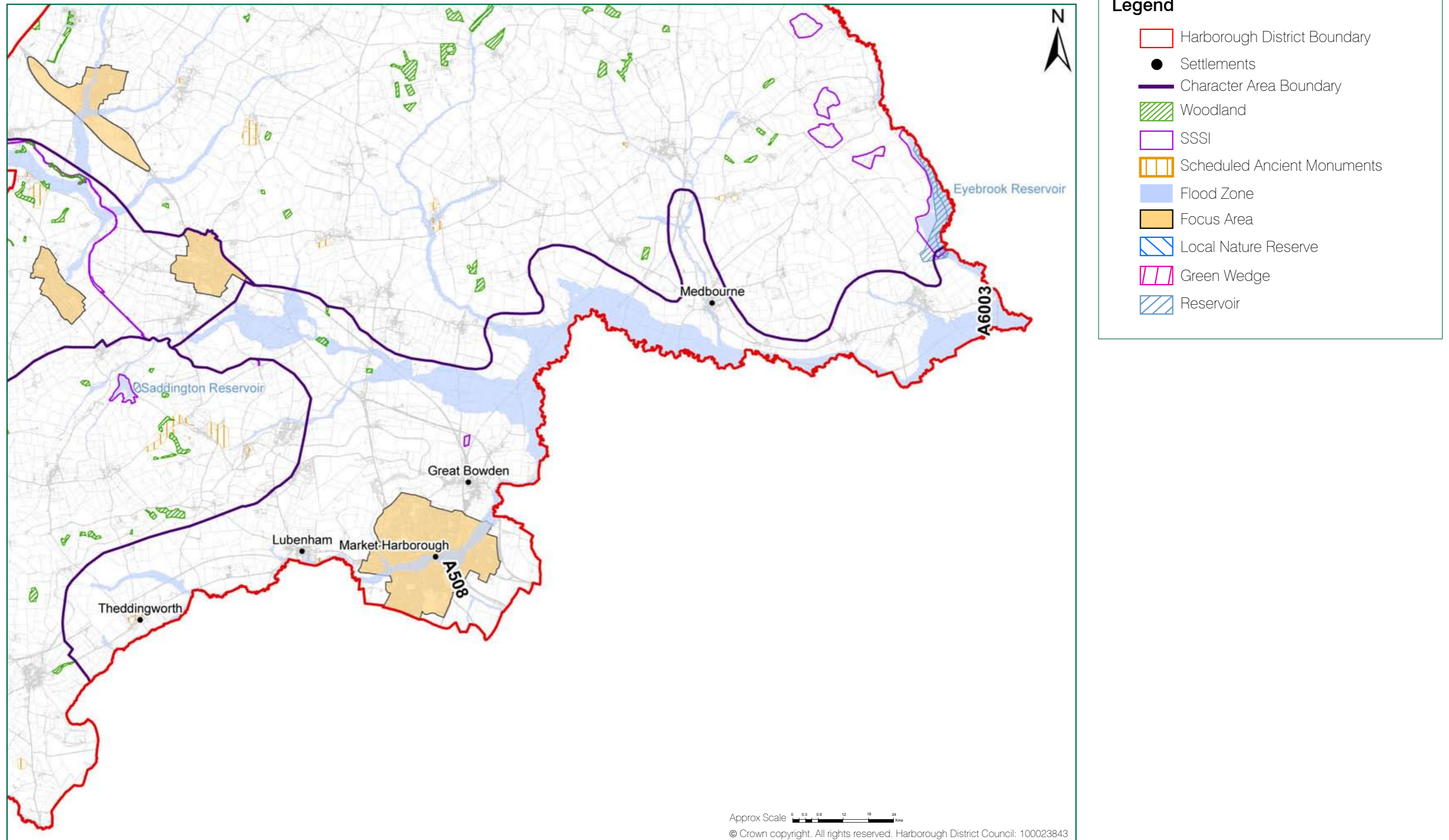


Figure 1.7: - Welland Valley- Landscape Character Plan



Ecology

The River Welland is known to support a range of bird species, small mammals and amphibians have been found in adjacent areas. White-clawed crayfish, water vole, reptiles and otters may also be present.

Other protected/ notable fauna that may be present in this area include badger, bats, amphibians, reptiles and nesting birds (including ground nesting bird species such as skylark and grey partridge in areas of arable land), brown hares may also be present in the arable fields.

One SSSI is present in the Welland Valley – Great Bowden Borrowpit SSSI, notable as it supports a tall fen plant community which is uncommon in the Midlands. Part of the Kilby-Foxton Canal SSSI also clips the western edge of the Welland Valley, although it is mostly located in the Lutterworth Lowlands.

Land Use

The large floodplain of the Welland Valley supports arable farming and grazing. The techniques used in modern farming have led to the creation of larger fields and the loss of hedgerows. Market Harborough is the largest town within the Welland Valley; Lubenham to the south west and Great Bowden to the north east are other main settlements, within this character area.

Urban Influence/ Settlement Pattern

The town of Market Harborough dominates the Welland Valley as a centre for both population and employment for the District. As a traditional market town it retains many of its historic buildings and features in its centre which have become mixed with some newer shopping developments such as St Mary’s Place. The outskirts of Market Harborough have given way to newer predominantly residential, office and retail developments.

Several major roads lead out of Market Harborough and through the Welland Valley including the B6047 to the north, A4304 towards Lutterworth and the A508 into Northamptonshire. The A6 provides an important road connection to Leicester to the north, and Kettering to the south east, Market Harborough is served by a mainline railway station.

There are a range of smaller settlements in the Welland Valley some of which have retained their traditional features such as Medbourne to the north east located along the Medbourne Brook. Many of the other villages in the region have been dissected by the busy through route of the A4304; their character tends to be affected by the through traffic of vehicles.



The Medbourne Brook flowing through Medbourne Village



Heritage

The Welland Valley is made up of a number of villages which have their origins in agricultural activity. Of the Scheduled Ancient Monuments in the character area, the majority of them relate to deserted or shrunken medieval settlements which reflects the agricultural use and settlement of the area during this period. Associated with use of the land are areas of ridge and furrow earthworks surrounding present day or former villages. However, for the most part, the area was used for pasture rather than arable due to its tendency to flood.

Market Harborough itself is first mentioned in 12th century as a manor with 200 tax payers. By the 14th century there was evidence of commercial activity such as wool trading but agriculture was the mainstay of the economy, as with the other villages in the area. Textile and clothing manufacture continued to take place but Market Harborough owes its early prosperity to its location on a good thoroughfare, being equally distanced from Leicester and Northampton. Together with this and the large number of inns and coaching houses, the town was able to provide residences to followers of the Hunts in the region.

The construction of the Grand Union Canal, in the early 1800s meant that Harborough was the centre for distribution of coal to Kettering and onwards to Huntingdon. Later the railway constructed in 1850 helped to develop the industrial growth of the town.

The town remained popular for settlement and with a growing population new large residential developments were constructed. The A6 bypass has helped to calm traffic in the centre maintaining

the market town appearance; however it has grown and developed quite substantially in recent years in comparison to other settlements nearby.

Capacity: Medium

The Welland Valley comprises a generally flat floodplain with predominantly agricultural land use. Due to the general lack of vegetation cover across the floodplain clear views extend across the majority of the valley. The character area has a medium capacity to accept small scale development.

Areas further from Market Harborough, within the more rural areas, have lower levels of capacity and development should be avoided. Within the areas immediately surrounding Market Harborough, development is possible with consideration of issues related to its layout, natural extents and envelope, defined in the main by topographical features.

The character area has the capacity to accommodate some residential development around Market Harborough and to a lesser extent around Great Bowden and Lubenham, the larger settlements within the character area. The villages further away from Market Harborough would have less capacity to accommodate significant development, as the more rural influences of the character area increase.

Key Issues

- The relatively flat and open landscape is vulnerable to adverse visual and landscape impacts of development.
- The immediate landscape setting to Market Harborough is very vulnerable to inappropriately sited development, both in the valley base to the east, above the ridgeline to the north and adjacent to enclosing landscape features to the west and south. It is important that care is taken to prevent further new development that impacts on the ridgeline and valley base, as well as views from the wider landscape setting of Market Harborough.
- The generalised lack of woodland cover across the landscape character area means that new development must be well mitigated to minimise impacts. Opportunities for new woodland screen planting should be encouraged alongside any new development proposals.



Looking east from Paynes Lane across Medbourne village



Grand Union Canal on western border of Market Harborough