This description is an amalgamation of 142 Somerset Levels and Moors and 143 Mid Somerset Hills.

Key Characteristics

- Flat, open landscape of wet pasture, arable and wetland divided up by wet ditches or 'rhynes'.
- Absence of dispersed farmsteads or any buildings on levels and moors. Nucleated settlements on ridges/islands.
- Surrounded, and divided up, by low hills, ridges and islands which form distinctive skylines.
- Peat working and nature reserves contrasting with the rectilinear planned landscape of the Moors.
- Dramatic and prominent hills such as Brent Knoll, the Isle of Avalon and Barrow Mump, rising above the Levels and Moors.
- Sparse tree cover on Levels and Moors contrasting with woodland, hedges and orchards of surrounding hills.
- Sparsely populated Moors but settlements common on hills, ridges and islands.
- Historic landscape strongly evident in features ranging from prehistoric trackways and lake villages to post-medieval enclosures and peat working.
- International nature-conservation significance for wetland, waders and waterfowl.
- Narrow dune belt fringing Bridgwater Bay.
- Raised rivers and levées, with main roads and causeways flanked by houses. Flooding in winter over large areas.

Landscape Character

The Somerset Levels and Moors is a broad area of low-lying farmland and wetland surrounded and divided up by low hills and ridges which form the Mid Somerset Hills. On the northern boundary, the Mendip Hills rise steeply out of the flat landscape. To the east, the Yeovil Scarplands subside into more gentle landforms which extend into the character area as a complex of islands and ridges that include the Polden Hills. To the west, the Vale of Taunton merges with the area and, in the south west, the Blackdowns subside to the low rounded landforms around Hatch Beauchamp and Curry Rivel.

Major rivers rise on the surrounding higher ground and cut through the Mid Somerset Hills to form an intricate series of ridges and islands. These create the complex views of flat land framed by very varied skylines which are the area's most distinctive characteristic.

There are five distinct elements to the Levels and Moors landscape: the hills and islands; the peat Moors which lie between them; the clay Levels towards the coast; the dunes and tidal flats of the coast itself; and the sand banks or 'burtles' marking the position of former river channels.

The peat moors occupy extensive areas in the Brue Valley, as at South Moor, Glastonbury. Water channels, known as rhynes, mark out a rectilinear pattern of fields, and serve to remove floodwater and provide a water supply to the grazing marsh in summer.

From the hills there are expansive views across the Levels and Moors. These take on particular variety and richness where the small hillocks punctuate the moors, as they do south of the Mendip Hills or where a complex landform like the Isle of Avalon rises abruptly. The hills are generally
well-wooded, with good tree and hedgerow cover, and this softens the often frequent settlement. Small villages are commonly strung out near the junction with the wetlands from which trackways (droves) extend into the low-lying pastures. Small towns and villages like Somerton and Street lie within the Mid Somerset Hills in sheltered sites, but other settlements like Meare, Wedmore and Wookey, intermixed with small orchards and paddocks, have more of a wetland edge character, with winding roads closely following the form of the ridges. Many settlements retain a uniformity of building style and materials, perhaps most noticeable in the Lias Limestone buildings of Somerton. Many tall church towers are evidence of medieval wealth, but none is more dramatic than St Michael’s on Glastonbury Tor, visible for miles across the flat wetlands.

The Levels are a low belt of marine clay which runs parallel to the coast and which, by holding back the drainage from the surrounding hills, has been responsible for the formation of the Moors. With its intermittent areas of sinuous lanes and irregular fields, it is an older landscape than the reclaimed moors and more densely populated. The Levels abut a coastline of extensive mudflats around the Parrett estuary and the edge of Bridgwater Bay where sand dunes extend northwards to Brean Down, and caravan parks and camp sites are prominent features. Finally, inland, on the 'burtles', there are modest-size old settlements rising slightly above the surrounding flat landscape.

However, despite being easily described in terms of its component parts, the Somerset Levels and Moors have a strong unity and a distinctive character. Hawkins identifies how ‘its ancient pristine atmosphere co-exists with the sea walls and sluices and pumping stations of more recent days. Indeed, a great deal of its charm and interest is due to its paradoxical character as being at once more wild and primitive and yet more artificial than any other part of England.’

Physical Influences

The Quaternary muds, sands and peats of the Levels and Moors, formed over the last 10,000 years, are underlain by the Mesozoic Central Somerset Basin, involving Jurassic and Triassic strata. During Quaternary times it is possible that the Bristol Channel was blocked by ice, forming a large lake over much of the character area. The surrounding hills are predominantly underlain by late Triassic/early Jurassic grey clays and limestones which overlie red Mercia Mudstone. Along the coast there are areas of sand dunes and storm gravel beaches which protect the hinterland from incursions by high tides.

The full glory of the species-rich grazing marshes becomes apparent in late June, just before the hay cut. This view, at Chilton Moor, shows the well-wooded appearance given to parts of the moors by the willow pollards. In the background is the Polden Hills ridge, part of the Mid Somerset Hills.
Rivers draining into the basin from the surrounding hills include the Brue, Axe and Parrett. Until the drainage schemes of the 18th century, the clay of the Levels, supplemented by sea walls, held back the sea but also held back river water and there was widespread seasonal flooding. The present water regime depends on gravity drainage at low tide with pumps to remove excess backing and to drain agricultural land, since much of the Moors is below high tide level. The regime depends on set winter and summer water levels.

**Historical and Cultural Influences**

The hills and ridges appear to have been sites for settlement from early prehistoric times, linked across the wetlands by trackways, of which the 'Sweet Track' dating from c4000 BC is the best known. They continued to be built for millennia and the well-known Iron Age lake-villages of Meare and Glastonbury were part of the marshland economy that probably persisted through the prehistoric period. Roman settlement, too, was extensive on the Mid Somerset Hills, with villas extending northwards within the influence of the important centre of Ilminster, which lies outside the character area.

By the time the Saxons arrived, the higher land had a settled landscape: there were quite intensively populated hills from which the marshlands were exploited. Somerton may have become the centre of the Sumorsaete, the Saxon people after whom Somerset is named and the numerous
ton and ey settlements are evidence of this Saxon occupation. In the Viking invasions, Athelney, isolated in the centre of the marshes, was King Alfred’s refuge and today it is marked by a memorial, although the monastery that he founded has long since disappeared. Glastonbury had even older associations with Christianity and the vast estates of Glastonbury included much of the Levels and Moors. The abotts of Glastonbury Abbey were the driving force for reclamation in the 13th century when raised causeways were laid out across the levels. A new course was cut for the Brue and the land around the higher ground was reclaimed. However, following the floods and population decline of the 14th century, it was not until the 1770s that major reclamation began. It had been substantially completed by 1840. However, severe flooding was an ever-present danger well into the present century and was only resolved by the digging of the Huntspill River, a new outfall for the Brue, and provision of new pumping stations.

The strong planned element in the Levels and Moors landscape is also evident in the towns and villages. Langport, for instance, is laid out along a single street and many of the villages are surrounded by strip fields. Most of the inland towns and villages have grown only gradually in recent times but Bridgwater on the edge of the area expanded rapidly as a coal port and industrial centre in the 19th century and has continued to expand in the present century.

Willow pollards leaning over rhynes are very characteristic of the area.

**Buildings and Settlement**

Out on the Moors, the few buildings are mainly 19th century farms or more recent farmsteads, mainly of brick or occasionally Blue Lias, with clay pantile roofs and occasional thatch. Towards the sea, settlements on the Levels become a little commoner. The roads in some areas are sinuous and narrow, sometimes following the line of the old sea walls, but elsewhere the roads are slightly raised and straight.

Towards the coast the Clay Levels form an open grazing marsh landscape. The old course of the river Axe is observed in this overview from Brean Down

In contrast, the low ridges, hills and islands within the Moors have dense networks of lanes and footpaths connecting numerous villages and hamlets: trackways lead to farms and run down to the edge of the Levels. Although Blue Lias is quite frequently used, a variety of other materials have been used in older buildings including oolite, sandstone and conglomerate, whilst many 19th century buildings are in brick and pantile produced by the local industry centred on Bridgwater or imported from Flanders.

Most 20th century development can be found around the edge of the area. Along the coastal strip, holiday caravans and chalets extend southwards from Brean. Highbridge, Burnham on Sea and Bridgwater are substantial settlements and residential and industrial development extends across the open landscape.

**Land Cover**

The land is predominantly used for agriculture, with dairying being the major industry on the Levels and Moors and a greater diversity of farming on the higher ground. On the Levels, the main tree and shrub cover is willow pollards with a few shelterbelts of poplar. On the Moors, there are bands of willow-dominated scrub around peat workings and within nature reserves. Withies are grown and reed beds are being established. Clumps of trees are also present around farmsteads and decoy ponds. The predominant field pattern is rectilinear, bounded by deep, wide, wet 'rhynes'. The major active peat extraction sites are in the Brue valley where former peat works are being developed as nature reserves.

Along the higher ground, pasture tends to be the main land cover but the fields are small and irregular except where there are planned settlements. Orchards are a particular
feature of the land at the edge of the levels, such as the Polden Hills. Hedgerows typically contain a wide range of species and hedgerow trees are common. Woodlands are common on the ridge tops and steeper side slopes.

Around the edge of the Levels, built-up areas tend to be contained by the nature of the ground but, around Weston-super-Mare, the airport and industrial buildings occupy a substantial area on the eastern sides.

The hills comprise ridges within the Somerset Levels and Moors. In this view, from the Mendip scarp near Easton, the Wells-Wedmore ridge separates the Axe Valley Levels in the foreground from the Brue Valley Moors beyond. The Polden Hills appear in the background, with the Blackdowns in the far distance.

The Changing Countryside

- Peat working is still a significant influence on the Brue valley where there is now active conversion to wetlands for nature conservation.

- A small amount of conversion of grassland to arable has taken place in the recent past. This now appears to have stopped in the Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA), except at the edges. Some arable crops, such as maize, can be widely visible in a flat and predominantly pasture landscape.

- Pollarding of willows had been in decline although this is now stemmed to some extent.

- Small, old orchards on the edges of the Levels are in decline through neglect and removal but there is now interest in their conservation.

- On the coastal strip, expansion of caravan parks and holiday facilities is very intrusive, particularly on the dunes.

- The woodlands on the ridges and 'islands' within the Levels are largely unmanaged. Their decline would create a significant impact on landscape character.

- Some modern development has been inappropriate to the character of the villages. Urban edge development and new roads can be very intrusive in an open landscape.

- There are extensive areas of high subsurface archaeological interest which require careful management of the water regime and monitoring of drainage operations.

Shaping the Future

- Water levels are the key to the management of the Levels and Moors. The levels chosen for particular areas must address the integration of landscape, nature conservation, urban drainage and agricultural objectives.

- There is continuing high potential for restoration of wetlands through a number of strategies, management plans and other initiatives. Although management initiatives on the Levels and Moors tend to be nature-conservation led – in view of the area’s international importance – the landscape issues need equal consideration.

- Orchards on the fringe of the Hills are a particular feature and their conservation may well be appropriate.

Selected References


Somerset County Council (nd), *Somerset Countryside Strategy: Landscape*, Somerset County Council.

ADAS, *Somerset Levels and Moors Sensitive Area: Landscape Assessment*.


In the winter the peat moors are often flooded, with little detriment to traditional grazing. Here, on Tadham Moor, the ryhnes are fringed with grown-out willow pollards.
The Mid Somerset Hills rise abruptly from the Somerset Levels and Moors and, around Aller and Somerton, form a tableland of Lower Lias limestones. Here the scarp and plateau of Aller Hill is seen across the Parrett Levels from Aller Moor.


East of Wells and Pilton the ridges coalesce to form hilly country which eventually merges with the Yeovil Scarplands. This view, at East Compton, is typical of that country, which was formerly crowded with tall hedgerow elms.

The Fivehead Ridge forms a prominent scarp rising above West Sedge Moor in this view across Aller Moor from Combe, near Langport.