

Yeovil Scarplands

Character Area

140



Key Characteristics

- A very varied landscape of hills, wide valley bottoms, ridgetops and combes united by scarps of Jurassic limestone.
- Mainly a remote rural area with villages and high church towers.
- Wide variety of local building materials including predominantly Ham Hill Stone.
- Small manor houses and large mansions with landscape parks.
- Varied land use: arable on the better low-lying land, woodland on the steep ridges and deep combes.

Landscape Character

The Yeovil Scarplands sweep in an arc from the Mendip Hills around the southern edge of Somerset Levels and Moors to the edge of the Blackdowns. Rivers like the Brue, Parrett and Yeo drain from the higher ground of the Scarplands cutting an intricate pattern of irregular hills and valleys which open out to the moorland basins. To the east there is a gradual transition to Blackmore Vale and the Vale of Wardour and the area is separated from Marshwood Vale by the ridge above the Axe Valley.

This is a landscape of very varied landform and complex geology which is united by the rhythm of the broad ridges and steep scarps of the Jurassic limestone. Between the ridges and scarps are subtly different, often intensively farmed, clay vales. There are small hamlets and villages and the use of local stone in the older buildings is a unifying feature within the area. Some of the settlements have a planned, estate village element and many have substantial and often dominant churches which serve to emphasise the significance of the stone. The soft yellow of Ham Hill Stone is widespread but there are also cream and pink-coloured limestones and sandstones. Even when, as on the south-west edge, tree cover is sparse and there is some urban influence, stone buildings and the sunken holloways, which also characterise the area, are still apparent.

Much of the higher ground has sparse hedge and tree cover with an open, ridgetop, almost downland, character. In some areas, the high ground is open grassland falling away steeply down intricately folded slopes. There are spectacular views across the lowland landscape framed by sheltered golden-stoned villages like Batcombe. In other areas of high ground, there is more arable and the ridges are broader. The steep slopes below these open ridge tops are in pasture use and are cut by narrow, deep valleys ('goyles') often with abundant bracken and scrub. Within the valleys there is a strong character of enclosure and remoteness.



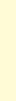
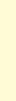
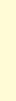
JULIAN COMRIE/COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY

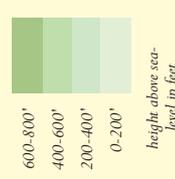
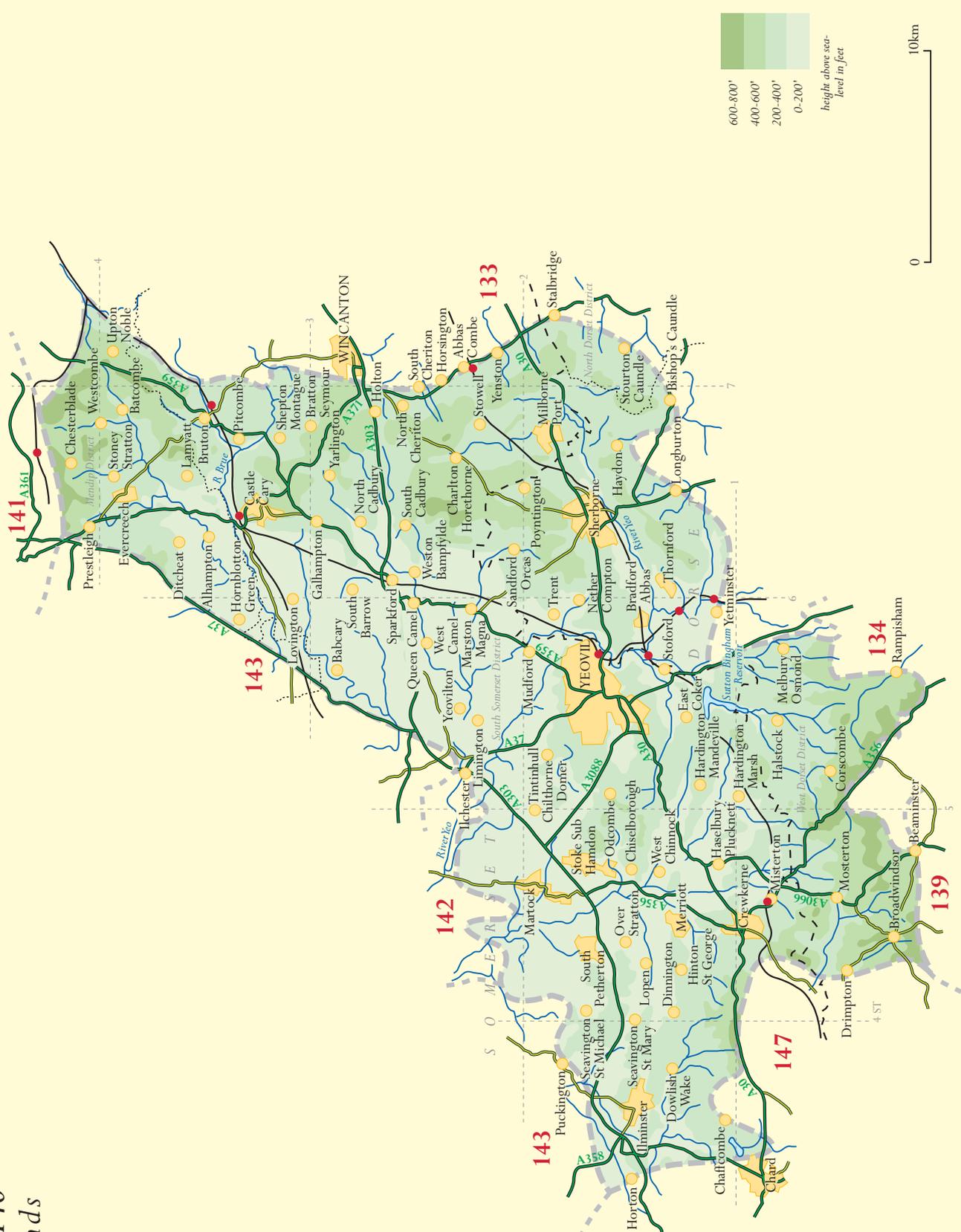
The Yeovil Scarplands comprise several scarps and vales formed on block-faulted Jurassic limestones and clays. Hamdon Hill is formed of Ham Hill Stone, rich yellow shelly limestone used in local buildings. The wide Lias clay vale lies below, with the Cadbury-Cotton Ridge scarps in the distance.

The steeper scarps are commonly wooded and, in places, have prominent hillforts although the two most spectacular hillforts of South Cadbury and Ham Hill lie on lower ground. Between the scarps and ridges, the clay vales are mostly gently rolling landscapes of medium-size fields with a dominant field pattern extending up and over the rising ground. There are also areas with a strongly rectilinear pattern, which are mostly arable, and others where hedges are low or non-existent and trees largely absent. Here, as in the land around Ilminster, open fields survived until very recently and the landscape has been very open in character since well before the late Middle Ages. Streamside willow pollards and alder provide the principal vegetation and



Character Area 140 Yeovil Scarplands

-  Area 140 boundary
-  Adjacent Area
-  A Road
-  B Road
-  Railway and station
-  County boundary
-  District boundary



streamside pasture survives, threading through many of the vales.

An intricate network of winding lanes and holloways frames the landscape, contrasting with the straight roads and rectilinear field pattern on the downlands and valley bottoms. They link the numerous villages and hamlets, which are rarely more than two miles apart, while the farmsteads are generally to be found on the spring lines of the sheltered lower slopes and minor valleys. There are also much grander landscapes found around the mansions built from the Elizabethan period onwards such as Montacute, Barrington Court and Dillington House. The surrounding parklands of lime, oak and beech are conspicuous features, especially when, as at Sherborne Park, the adjacent tree cover is not extensive. However, the abiding impression of the area is of sleepy stone villages and rural quiet captured by T S Eliot:

‘Now the light falls
Across the open field, leaving the deep lane
Shattered with branches, dark in the afternoon,
Where you lean against a bank while a van passes
And the deep lane insists on the direction
Into the village, in the electric heat
Hypnotised. In a warm haze the sultry light
Is absorbed, not refracted, in grey stone.’

Physical Influences

The character area is underlain mainly by Jurassic rocks which are alternations of clays, limestones and sandstones. They include Lias clays, sands and silts, the Yeovil Sands, Ham Hill Stone, Inferior Oolite, Fullers' Earth, Forest Marble and Cornbrash. The limestones and sandstones tend to form a series of scarps which tread east-west but are much broken by faults in the south around Yeovil. In the north of the area, the scarps move north-south. The soils are largely calcareous clays and brown earths, with small areas of stagnogleys. Most of the land lies between 50 m and 150 m AOD, with a low point of 10 m next to the Somerset Levels and Moors, rising to 230 m on the higher ridges and hills. The tributaries of the Brue, Yeo and Parrett dissect the scarp slopes into a pattern of rolling ridges and valleys and flow north towards Bridgwater Bay.

Historical and Cultural Influences

Although occupation of the fertile, sheltered lands of this area is likely to have taken place from an early date, and there is certainly evidence dating from the Mesolithic, the main prehistoric features in today's landscape are the hillforts at South Cadbury and Ham Hill, which were the foci of activity from the Neolithic to the Iron Age. It is possible that the downland ridges were cleared at an early date and the lower ground, especially the steeper slopes, remained more wooded. However, the best soils on the

lower ground were favoured by the Romans and there were several villas in the southern part of the area.

As well as at South Cadbury, there was a focus of post-Roman activity at Ilchester. From early Saxon times throughout the Middle Ages, other centres like South Petherton, Crewkerne, and Bruton were also of continued importance as Saxon burhs and later medieval boroughs. The general absence of woodland place names indicate that the Saxons took over a substantially cleared and settled landscape and, by the time of Domesday Book, the area was quite densely populated. Moreover, current sites of deserted settlements indicate that the area was probably densely settled in the Middle Ages. Some of these desertions, however, may be associated with the laying out of new villages, since many have a planned appearance, central greens and Norman-French place-name elements (eg Hazelbury Plucknett). The moated sites and small castles indicate the division of the area among minor lords in the 11th to 13th centuries.



JOHN TYLER/COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY

Within the scarp country, interlocking combes, relatively small fields with high-grown, well-timbered hedges and mixed farming make for interesting countryside, as at Yarlinton near Castle Cary.

Open fields were probably formed in many localities in the Middle Ages where the terrain was suitable, with the high ridges remaining open downland and the steeper slopes woodland or open sheepwalks. Although the fields have now been enclosed (in the sense of being under separate ownership) hedges were not universal in the fertile south west and the appearance of the landscape there today has something in common with that of the later Middle Ages.

While most of the towns in the area have remained small and dominated by a core of older stone buildings, Yeovil grew steadily as an industrial centre in the 19th and 20th centuries and the naval air station to the north of the town is now a significant feature in the landscape.

The rural charm of the area has been widely celebrated by topographers, but the strongest literary association is with

East Coker, the home of T S Eliot's Puritan ancestors. He is buried in the village church which was the motif of the second of his *Four Quartets*.



JOHN TYLER/COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY

Evercreech lies in a broad vale, flanked by hills and ridges to the east, as in this view from Milton Clevedon, on the slopes of Creech Hill.

Buildings and Settlement

Although the area has many settlements, the villages and hamlets tend to lie in the valleys. The farmsteads are generally on the valley sides, so that some views across the downland and ridges give the impression of a sparsely settled land. The most favoured sites, near the streams and rivers, are the locations for towns like Sherborne and Milborne Port which grew from Saxon burhs to become market towns but still remain small and rural. Yeovil is the principal town and the only one to have expanded significantly from its riverside origins onto the surrounding hills.

The settlements are linked by narrow lanes and the area is cut across by major roads which tend to follow ridgelines or valley bottoms. Smaller lanes and trackways lead from the settlements in the valleys up onto the higher ground.

Of the many materials used for the buildings, Ham Hill Stone – to be seen particularly at Sherborne, Crewkerne, Ilminster and Martock – is the most celebrated. Clifton-Taylor writes that 'in the contemplation of these rich gold brown surfaces spotted with lichens, usually of freestone and here and there sumptuously dressed, the eye may find insatiable pleasure'. In many cottages and farmhouses, it takes on yet another range of texture and colour when used in rubble construction. It is also the stone of the major country houses like Brympton D'Evercy, Montacute and Dillington House. The mansion houses are particularly thick on the ground south and west of Yeovil but there are many

smaller houses in local stone well-sited in small parks. In the north, the grey oolitic limestones tend to be used instead of Ham Hill Stone and to the east the complicated geology provides sandstones, limestone and greensand. The older buildings are commonly local stones but the 19th century ones are more predominantly of brick. Before the widespread accessibility of stone, the older style of building was timber frame and thatch. Some of these elements still survive although most roofs are now pantiles or grey slate.

Land Cover

The land is primarily in agricultural use with a mixture of arable, dairying and stock rearing. Arable predominates on the good, fertile soils like the Yeovil Sands around South Petherton. A very wide range of crops is grown and there are remnant orchards, commonly with poplar shelter belts. Grassland, however, is the principal land cover, with a range from lush, improved pastures in the valley bottoms to steep hillside pastures. The latter in places run to scrub and many are of nature-conservation interest.

Hedges away from the Yeovil Sands are commonly thick with substantial banks and on the uplands there are scattered areas of dry stone walls. Small woodlands, scrub and copses are present, particularly in the sunken hollows and 'goyles'. Woodland, however, is most frequent on the steep slopes and, although there has been some planting of conifers, a number of semi-natural ancient woodlands survive.



JOHN TYLER/COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY

At Lower Eastcombe, near Batcombe, the characteristic mixed farming pattern of the scarplands is evident.

The Changing Countryside

- There has been a general loss of both woodland and hedgerow trees (the latter particularly as a consequence of Dutch Elm disease), and grubbing up of orchards.

There is a tradition of pollarding hedgerow ash trees which no longer continues.

- There has been a general lack of woodland management and some conversion of deciduous woodland to conifers.
- There is continuing development pressure on the large villages and market towns. The character of these rural areas may be affected by the scale of new residential development. Continued retail and commercial development is likely on the more open land around some of the larger towns like Ilminster and Yeovil.
- On the Yeovil Sands there is soil erosion in areas of arable cultivation. The soils are very light and holloways tend to collapse.
- In the more intensively-farmed areas, some rivers are being straightened and new ditches cut. Riverbank management is sometimes poor.
- Some of the lesser historic parks are not in active management. Here, scrub encroachment and deterioration of parkland trees may become a problem.

Shaping the Future

- The variation in local distinctiveness might be enhanced through initiatives at a district, farm and parish level. Particular care is needed to respect the wide range of hedgerow and hedgerow tree patterns, and the type and location of woodland.
- Wildlife habitats tend to be fragmented. They include road verges, grassland on steep slopes and small woodlands. The variety of plant species that they contain also adds to the interest and texture of the landscape and an appropriate scale of conservation measures needs to be considered.
- The conservation of wetland and streamside features, including pollards, wet grassland and meanders, needs to be addressed.
- Parklands would also benefit from long-term management.
- Much of the character of the area depends on the materials and building styles used in the villages and hamlets. Village Design Statements or similar schemes would be appropriate.

Selected References

- Countryside Commission (1994), *The New Map of England: A Celebration of the South Western Landscape*, Countryside Commission, Cheltenham CCP 444.
- Havinden, M (1980), *The Somerset Landscape*, Hodder & Stoughton, London.
- Taylor, C (1970), *Dorset*, Hodder & Stoughton.
- Landscape Design Associates (1993), *Dorset County Landscape Assessment*, Countryside Commission, Dorset County Council, Purbeck District Council.
- Somerset County Council (nd), *Somerset Countryside Strategy : Landscape*, Somerset County Council/Countryside Commission, Cheltenham.

Glossary

AOD: Above Ordnance Datum

burgh: fortress, castle, court, manor house.



Isolated hills and hillocks characterise the broken scarps. Here Cadbury Castle, a possible Arthurian fortress, stands prominently amid pastoral scenes.

JOHN TYLER/COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY