

County map showing location of LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREA



LOCATION

A south-west/north-east ridge between Radlett and Redwell Woods, south of the Vale of St Albans.

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

A strong and locally prominent ridge feature as seen from the north where steep slopes rise from the Vale of St Albans. Land cover is a mix of woodland, small pasture fields and built development, which all contribute to the skyline character. Panoramic views to and from the ridge characterise the area.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- south-west/north-east elevated ridge with steeper northern slopes
- extensive woodland areas, notably Combe Wood on horizon
- areas of grazing in small/medium fields with hedged enclosure, locally mixed with arable and 'set-aside' fields
- prominent ridge-top residential development within grounds of former Shenley Hospital
- historic settlement of Shenley and scattered farms set on narrow plateau and relatively concealed
- panoramic views to and from ridgeline, particularly to the north
- intrusive impact of M25 and pylon lines as they rise over ridge



DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

- Shenley Park - rural parkland
- Shenley water tower - major landmark
- grain silo at Redwell Wood Farm

- Grazing on ridge paddocks (J. Billingsley)

PHYSICAL INFLUENCES

Geology and soils. The underlying geology to the majority of the area comprises Tertiary clay overlaid by acidic seasonally waterlogged soils with some brown subsoils (Windsor series). Locally there are areas of fine loamy and silty soils over the clays. On the higher ground around Shenley the geology is plateau and river terrace drift overlaid by seasonally waterlogged coarse loamy, fine loamy and fine silty over clayey soils (Essendon association).

Topography. The ridge slope appears prominent against the open St Albans Vale to the north. Along the length of the ridge slope there are more local undulations which create enclosure. The ridgeline is relatively consistent in height along its length.

Degree of slope. Slopes are typically 1 in 12 to the north.

Altitude range. Slopes from 95 to 127m. Plateau 120-127m except where the M25 cutting breaches the skyline at c.115m.

Hydrology. A number of springs occur where the glacial gravels meet the underlying clay. The clay soils also support small ponds on the higher ground around farmsteads and within Shenley village.

Land cover and land use. A mix of land cover includes woodland, grassland and arable. Agriculture is primarily pasture with livestock and equestrian land use, including stud farms, e.g. Shenley Stud Farm. Field boundaries have locally been replaced with fences rather than new hedgerows. There has been a limited shift from pasture to arable, particularly north east of the M25 up to Redwell Wood Farm.

Vegetation and wildlife. The major ancient wood is Combe Wood. Although the natural woodland mix is oak/hazel, species include oak, ash and hornbeam, together with hazel coppice, birch regeneration and occasional sweet chestnut and beech. Banks and ditches mark historic boundaries within the woods and there are areas of remnant wet heath in the rides. Isolated poplar plantations exist on the northern slopes. Hedgerows are medium height and mixed species, including hazel, field maple, hawthorn, blackthorn and elm, locally gappy and in need of restoration. Scattered specimen trees exist within the pasture and give a local parkland feel, e.g. at Shenley Lodge, although they are generally mature or over-mature.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

Shenley derived its name from the Saxon 'Schoenley' meaning a clearing in the forest. Parkland landscapes became a feature of the area from the 18th century and include Porters Mansion, home of the architect Nicholas Hawksmoor, whose walled garden and associated grounds now form part of Shenley Park. Shenley Hospital, opened in 1934 by George V, was planned on a villa system and housed up to 2000 patients. After its closure the only remaining feature was the water tower.

Field pattern. In the core of the area around Rectory Lane significant areas of the pre-18th century organic enclosure remain intact. Fields are generally small to medium in size and irregular in form. This pattern has been eroded elsewhere by 20th-century field amalgamation, particularly on the saddle where the M25 crosses over and there has been a move towards arable. The field pattern is generally irregular and verges are generally very narrow.

Transport pattern. Secondary roads climb over the ridge at Shenley and Shenley Lodge, with more minor lanes running along the ridgeline connecting villages and farms, e.g. Rectory Lane. The M25 is the dominant feature to the east of the area.

Settlements and built form. There is a mix of building styles within the area with vernacular materials including, brick and clay tile. Historically the settlement pattern was dispersed, with farms developing on the narrow ridge plateau. Shenley village developed where the plateau was locally wider. The former Shenley Hospital site, redeveloped in the 1990s for 900 houses, occupies a very prominent location on the south-west corner of the ridge. The parkland character of Porters Park has been retained and enhanced. The Clock Tower still represents a major landmark for miles.

VISUAL AND SENSORY PERCEPTION

The ridge is visually very prominent from outside the area as seen from the south across the Vale of St Albans. There are extensive open views from the ridge to the north over much of the county. The area has a sense of coherence, particularly where the pattern of small to medium fields and grazing has been retained.

Rarity and distinctiveness. The landscape is unusual within the county. This is due to the relatively prominent ridgeline and the fine views up to and from the ridge.

VISUAL IMPACT

Built development on the ridge and up the slopes at Shenley is a major feature. The new residential housing on the skyline which faces south is an unwelcome impact. The water tower is a major landmark for miles and the grain silo at Redwell Farm is also a major feature on the horizon. The M25 cuts through the ridge producing a major impact, particularly as seen from the north.

ACCESSIBILITY

The provision of footpaths up and down the ridge is generally good and the area has a network of local walks promoted by the Community Forest around Shenley. However, there are few bridleways, which is curious in view of the local equestrian activity. This could lead to potential conflicts along the narrow local lanes. Continuous access along the ridge is more restricted and locally interrupted by the M25. There are local attractions at Shenley Park gardens and the Cricket Centre of Excellence.

COMMUNITY VIEWS

The woodland in this landscape is a valued element (D).

LANDSCAPE RELATED DESIGNATIONS

Landscape Conservation Area.
Watling Chase Community Forest.

CONDITION

Land cover change: **localised**
Age structure of tree cover: **mixed**
Extent of semi-natural habitat survival: **fragmented**
Management of semi-natural habitat: **variable**
Survival of cultural pattern: **intact**
Impact of built development: **moderate**
Impact of land-use change: **low**

ROBUSTNESS

Impact of landform: **prominent**
Impact of land cover: **apparent**
Impact of historic pattern: **interrupted**
Visibility from outside: **widely visible**
Sense of enclosure: **open**
Visual unity: **coherent**
Distinctiveness/rarity: **unusual**

CONDITION	GOOD	Strengthen and reinforce	Conserve and strengthen	Safeguard and manage
	MODERATE	Improve and reinforce	Improve and conserve	Conserve and restore
	POOR	Reconstruct	Improve and restore	Restore condition to maintain character
		WEAK	MODERATE	STRONG
STRENGTH OF CHARACTER				

STRATEGY AND GUIDELINES FOR MANAGING**CHANGE: IMPROVE AND CONSERVE**

- support the Watling Chase Community Forest in the realisation of its objectives for the area
- reinforce and emphasise the strong ridgeline topography and existing pattern of woodland and tree cover by planting new belts and woodlands to provide visual and ecological linkage between isolated woodlands
- encourage further planting to the west to provide additional screening of residential development at Shenley, on both the skyline and the lower slopes
- develop a strategy for woodland and tree planting to minimise the impact of the M25 as it crosses the ridge. Include new belts and woods on skyline to link to Redwell Wood
- promote the appropriate management of coppice woodland in order to re-establish a rich ground flora and the distinction between different management systems, such as high forest and coppice-with-standards
- within parklands, including Shenley Park, ensure new planting is encouraged to maintain age diversity. Ensure landscape improvements respect the historic context of existing features and the form and character of parkland and gardens. Ornamental species should only be used to replace damaged or over-mature specimens, where appropriate
- promote hedgerow restoration and creation throughout the ridge to provide visual and ecological links between existing and proposed woodland areas. Pattern to follow historic field boundaries where possible and to reconnect rows of isolated field trees
- replace mature stands of poplars with native copses of trees and shrubs
- promote the creation of buffer zones between intensive arable production and important semi-natural habitats and the creation of links between semi-natural habitats
- promote both the creation of new ponds and the retention/enhancement for wildlife of existing ponds
- encourage the management of existing orchards and the creation of new orchards, using traditional varieties and minimal use of herbicides and pesticides
- promote the use of traditional hedged field enclosure where land is converted to equestrian pasture or where fences have been introduced
- promote the effective management of equestrian activity including the control of overgrazing
- promote crop diversification and the restoration of mixed livestock/arable farming where possible
- improve public access arrangements to woodlands and links with rights of way
- improve pedestrian and bridleway access to woodlands and promote new routes along the ridgeline as an alternative to use of the minor roads
- identify key public views across the Vale of St.Albans. Ensure that woodland is managed to retain and frame these views



- Skyline development at Shenley (J. Billingsley)