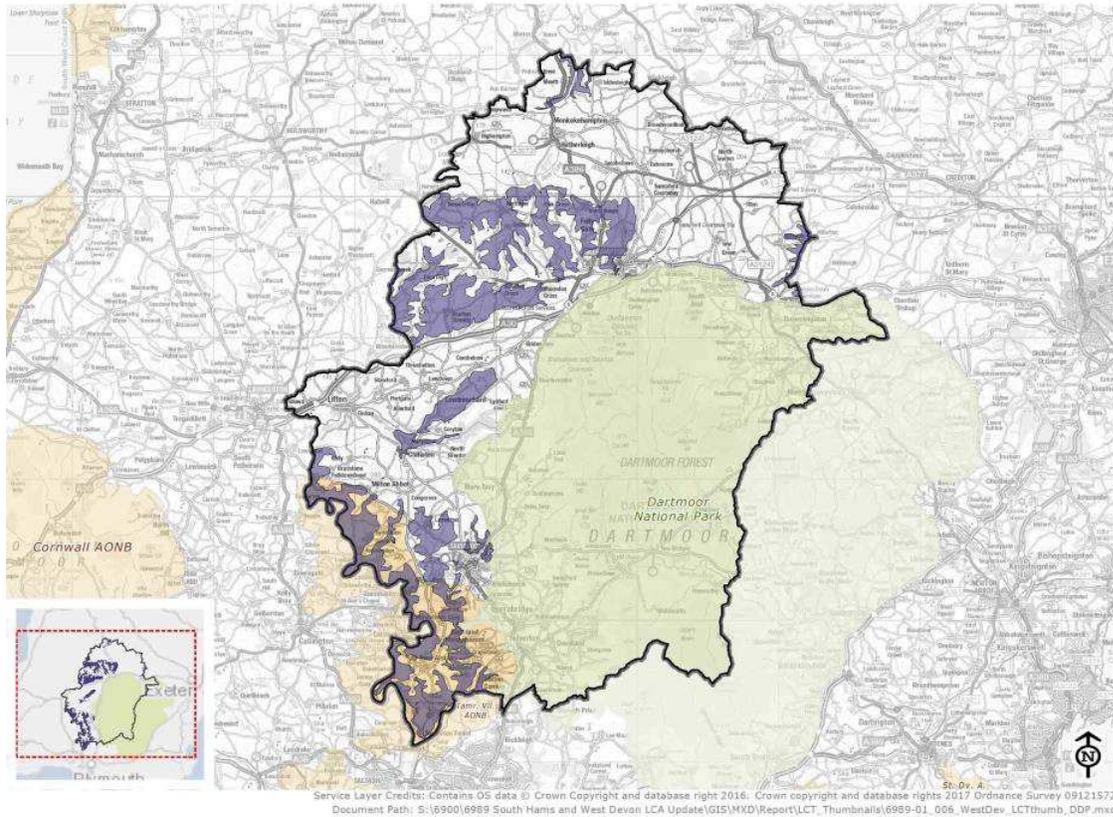


## LCT 3G: River Valley Slopes and Combes



3G. River valley slopes and combes

### Representative photographs



Summary of location and landscape character

**The LCT is located across the district on the banks of the numerous narrow rivers including the Lew, Lyd, Okemont, Tamar and Tavy river.**

Rounded hills and steep undulating slopes overlooking narrow river valleys.

## Landscape description

### Key characteristics

#### *Topography, geology and drainage*

- Rounded hills and undulating slopes, with branching narrow valley systems, overlooking narrow river courses. The landscape is crossed by networks of streams which drain into the rivers.
- Underlying geology predominantly comprising Devonian rocks (mudstone, silt stone and sandstone) with occasional intrusion of later igneous granite running west from Dartmoor to Milton Abbot. There are exposed rocky cliff faces in the middle reaches of the Tamar.

#### *Woodland cover*

- A well-wooded landscape with deciduous woodland fringing the streams and larger mixed and coniferous plantations cloaking lower river valley sides often masking the valley floor. There are extensive areas of ancient semi-natural oak woodland dominated by conifer plantations along the upper reaches of the River Tamar and Tavy.

#### *Land use and field patterns*

- A farmed landscape with pasture fields grazed by cattle and sheep with occasional arable fields and some rough grazing.
- Numerous traditional sheep-grazed orchards around settlements and hedgerow fruit trees which are a legacy of the soft fruit industry in the area.
- An intricate patterned mosaic of predominantly small to medium irregular fields of medieval origins or Barton Fields laid out in the 15-18th century and some modern enclosures particularly on lower ground.
- Field boundaries are generally species-rich hedgebanks with low hedges and mature hedgerow trees on lower slopes with stone gateposts and facings to banks at field entrances.

#### *Semi-natural habitats*

- Semi-natural habitats include extensive areas of deciduous woodland, much of which is ancient oak woodland noted for its lichen, particularly on the slopes of the River Tamar and Tavy. There are valued semi-natural habitats associated with the streams and small rivers including pockets of unimproved neutral or acid grassland, lowland heath, marshy grassland, mire and wet woodland as well as frequent areas of rush pasture, semi-improved grassland and scrub.

#### *Archaeology and cultural heritage*

- The landscape along the Tamar is designated as a World Heritage Site as part of the Cornwall and West Devon Mining Landscape. Past mining activity, mostly from the mining boom in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is evident along the Tamar valley through remnant mines structures and industrial remnants such as shafts, chimneys poking above mixed woodland, dismantled railway lines and buildings relating to the mining of copper, silver-lead and arsenic. The Devon Great Consols, now surrounded by woodland, was one of the largest copper and arsenic works, supplying half the world's arsenic by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- Buckland Abbey, a 13<sup>th</sup> century Cistercian abbey has extensive grounds running down to the Tavy.

#### *Settlement, road pattern and rights of way*

- A scattered settlement pattern of historic villages (most with Conservation Areas) often focused on the river crossings and quays, and dispersed farmhouses nestled in dips in the landscape.
- A strong local vernacular of whitewashed cottages with thatch or slate roofs with some exposed stone or slate hung facades. Stone farmhouses and farm buildings with stone gateposts and facing to banks at field entrances.
- Narrow sunken lanes bounded by high Devon hedges and hedgerow trees traverse the landscape, with some steep lengths where they dip down into the valleys.

- An extensive network of footpaths and bridleways reflects the mining past of the area when the area was well populated. The area is popular for recreation with long distance paths such as the Tamar Valley Discovery Trail and the Tarka Trail. The Tamar Valley Line is a popular steam railway taking visitors from Plymouth to Gunnislake.

*Views and perceptual qualities*

- The network of deeply incised lanes, woodland, and high hedgerows provide a sense of enclosure and seclusion, which contrasts with expansive vistas of the river valleys and green patch of fields and hedges from vantage points.
- A strong sense of tranquillity and experience of dark skies except where light pollution from the larger riverside towns (Tavistock and Okehampton) or from Plymouth affects the dark night skies.
- The southern part of the LCT forms part of the Tamar Valley AONB which recognises the unspoiled valley and water landscape, representing a classic English lowland river system.

## Landscape Evaluation

### Key landscape sensitivities

The following provides a summary of the key landscape sensitivities to development within this LCT:

- Secluded, rural tranquil valley landscape which is not interrupted by modern large scale development or roads;
- Extensive woodland cover, much of ancient origin retained on the steep valley sides;
- The legacy of the local soft fruit industry evident in remnant traditional orchards around villages and fruit trees in hedgerows;
- The field boundaries of species-rich Devon hedge banks enclosing a mosaic of field patterns from medieval to modern;
- Diverse and connected habitat network including semi-improved and unimproved neutral or acid grassland, plus areas of wet woodland, wet grassland and lowland heath on the lower slopes supporting rich wildlife;
- Internationally significant cultural landscape evident in the remnant mining and industrial structures along the Tamar Valley;
- Intact historic settlement pattern of small nucleated villages and dispersed farmhouses, with distinct Devon vernacular; many settlements designated as Conservation Areas, and with distinctive rural and riverside settings;
- The intimate winding narrow roads and sunken lanes enclosed by hedge banks which contribute to the hidden, secluded and historic character;
- Expansive and spectacular views across the estuaries and river valleys from vantage points contrast with the sense of seclusion along the lower valleys. This dramatic contrast in visual character is a distinctive characteristic particularly of the Tamar Valley AONB;
- Dark skies which can be experienced within the area away from the major conurbations of Okehampton and Tavistock.

### Summary of landscape condition

- Due to the relatively sparse settlements and lack of main road access the structure of the landscape – with its intimate enclosed river valleys and lack of built development – is intact. The overriding sense of tranquillity and remoteness can be interrupted in some areas which have views over settlements such as Okehampton and Tavistock. There are declining field boundaries in places, particularly in proximity to larger settlements.

### Forces for change

- Change in woodland / tree species composition as new pests/diseases spread (particularly *phytophthora pthogens* and ash die-back (*Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*)). Loss of trees within hedgerows would be particularly noticeable in this landscape type.
- Medieval field patterns are vulnerable and can be lost with changes in land ownership and cropping.
- Continuing decline in rural skills such as woodland management and hedge laying threatening the age and species diversity of semi-natural woodland and leading to variable quality of hedgebanks in some areas.
- Loss or lack of management of traditional farm orchards;

- Important wetland habitats may suffer from nutrient enrichment from agriculture or increasing drought conditions due to climate change, and demand for irrigation thus lowering groundwater levels, and reducing ecological value.
- Increased winter precipitation and decreased summer precipitation, will potentially alter river flows causing potential damage to habitats and species.
- Decline in livestock numbers leading to scrub encroachment on pastoral land.
- Continuing pressure for development particularly due to the LCT's proximity to the urban fringes of Okehampton and Tavistock. Development in these areas would affect the rural character and sense of tranquillity
- Recreational pressure, particularly in the Tamar Valley AONB, related to increase in traffic levels on narrow winding lanes likely to diminish levels of tranquillity.

# Landscape Strategy and Guidelines

## Overall Landscape Strategy

- To protect and enhance the peaceful character of the valley slopes, with fields enclosed by an intact network of species-rich Devon hedges fringed by well-managed woodlands. Opportunities are sought to restore conifer plantations to broadleaf woodland and other semi-natural habitats, creating a climate-resilient green network.

## Landscape Guidelines

- Protect the **strong perceptions of tranquillity, remoteness and seclusion** in the landscape, with its well managed woodlands and pastoral fields enclosed by an intact network of species-rich Devon hedgebanks and dark night skies and ensure the area remains valued for recreation.
- Manage and enhance the valleys' **semi-natural woodlands** through traditional woodland management. Control access by livestock, promoting natural regeneration to enhance longevity whilst using extensive grazing to promote the species diversity of woodland ground flora. Plan the natural regeneration of woodland and new planting (using climate-hardy species) to link fragmented sites.
- Manage the area's existing **plantations for sustainable timber production and wildlife interest**, creating new green links to surrounding semi-natural habitats. Plan for the long-term restoration of the more prominent conifer plantations to open habitats and broadleaved woodlands (where their role in timber production has ceased). Explore the retention of other plantations as recreational spaces (e.g. for mountain biking trails).
- Encourage the retention and **management of pasture fields** to control and eliminate scrub.
- Manage and extend areas of **wet woodland and floodplain grassland**, through appropriate grazing and traditional land management regimes – both to enhance their wildlife value and functions in flood prevention.
- Restore and manage areas of relict **traditional orchards** and explore opportunities for the creation of new ones, including community orchards to promote local food and drink production.
- Manage **species-rich Devon hedgebanks** through regular coppicing and relaying of gappy sections, strengthening irregular medieval field patterns. Replace lost lengths and lines of fencing, respecting traditional bank styles and species composition, particularly where at right angles to slopes, to help reduce soil erosion and run-off into watercourses.
- Protect and maintain the **industrial heritage** of the river valleys particularly along the Tamar. Promote understanding of the landscape's industrial heritage to ensure public access and recreation respects the presence of valued features.
- Protect the **lightly settled character** of the LCT ensuring that new development on the edges of nearby settlements does not encroach into the area (including related lighting schemes) and avoiding vertical structures in places such as Tavistock and Okehampton where there are already urban views.
- Protect the landscape's **traditional building styles and materials**, particularly the use of exposed stone, whitewashed or slate hung facades with thatch or slate roofs. Any new development or extensions should utilise the same materials and building styles wherever possible (whilst seeking to incorporate sustainable and low carbon building construction and design).
- Ensure that any **road improvements follow local guidance** for management of roadside verges and ditches in order to maximise their biodiversity potential.
- Encourage the creation of **new footpath links** to existing long distance footpaths, whilst ensuring the retention of inherent levels of tranquillity.