Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes
Historic Landscape Characterisation
County Archaeological Service 2006
Foreword

Buckinghamshire enjoys a rich and diverse landscape which has been shaped by mankind over hundreds of years giving every place its own distinctive character.

Today’s landscape reflects the endeavours of prehistoric farmers, medieval lords and peasants, the gentry’s garden designers and Victorian surveyors. This historic landscape project has for the first time mapped these changes across the whole historic county providing information to enrich our appreciation of Buckinghamshire’s special rural character. The report summarises the study’s conclusions and shows how its information can be used to care for this wonderful asset for the benefit of current and future generations. We urge all organisations and individuals with a responsibility for Buckinghamshire’s landscape to take heed of this study when planning for the future.

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Buckinghamshire County Council Cabinet
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Executive Summary

Historic Buckinghamshire is renowned for its fine rural landscapes; the chalk hills of the Chilterns, the picturesque clayland villages of north Buckinghamshire, the attractive landscape of the Thames Valley and its many historic parks and gardens. Practically everything we can see in our present landscape is the outcome of centuries of human endeavour, farming, settlement, trade, of economic and spiritual need. All of these components combine to create the varied landscapes that are highly valued by both residents and visitors.

In order to better appreciate and value this special resource, Buckinghamshire County Council, Milton Keynes Council and English Heritage have completed an Historic Landscape Characterisation project (HLC) for the entire historic county. The product is a system that can produce a wide range of maps that characterise the distinctive, historic dimension of today’s rural environment and aims at improving our understanding and management of the landscape.

This report provides a non-technical summary of this three-year study explaining its methodology, what it tells us and what it is for. The report acts as a guide to technical appendices and data (much of it available on-line) and illustrates ways in which HLC is being used to promote sustainable development and land management, and to promote community involvement. HLC will be an essential information source for planning sustainable growth and will be of interest to all who value Buckinghamshire landscapes or wish to know more about its past.

The technical appendices can be accessed under “Historic Landscape Characterisation” on the County Council Archaeology web pages:

http://www.buckscc.gov.uk/archaeology/index.htm
The Buckinghamshire HLC Project is part of a national programme sponsored by English Heritage and undertaken by local authority archaeology services. The intention is to achieve complete national coverage.

Every place has historic origins so the HLC study covers every part of the county whether ancient or modern, not just those of recognised historic interest. By looking afresh at the present day landscape it shows how our everyday surroundings are often influenced by patterns established long ago.

HLC therefore helps explain how and why the landscape looks as it does, how old different landscapes are and how they have changed. The project provides complete coverage emphasising the human processes that have led to and remain evident in its current appearance.

The primary aim of HLC is to create a consistent model of the historic landscape that is clear and can be used to plan for a future that retains these distinctive characteristics of Buckinghamshire’s landscape.

HLC involves bringing together existing information, normally at a high level of generalisation to provide understanding of the essential characteristics of the landscape history. The characterisation process itself is purely descriptive, but it provides a robust basis for making value judgements (e.g. about sensitivity or capacity for change).

HLC complements but does not replace long established methodologies for assessing historic buildings and archaeological monuments.

Bucks HLC covers the modern administrative county of Buckinghamshire and the unitary authority of Milton Keynes. It includes the District Council’s covering Aylesbury Vale, Chiltern, South Bucks and Wycombe. The study area extends from the Ouse valley in the north to the River Thames and Greater London in the south, in total covering 1837.5km².

Part 1: Overview of the Study - Background
Overview of the Study - Methodology

The Buckinghamshire HLC project started with the landscape as observed on modern maps and aerial photographs. It assigned each piece of land first to a broad “Landscape Group” and then to a more detailed “Historic Landscape Type”. Historic maps were also consulted going back to the early 19th century, in some cases earlier. Special attention was given to fields created by acts of parliament in the 18th and 19th centuries as this process is well documented and affected 37% of the historic county.

In view of the dominance and distinctiveness of these parliamentary enclosures in the north of the county, the project plotted the surviving fields from parliamentary enclosure maps. The information was recorded on a Geographical Information System (GIS).

Another key element of the project was the analysis and recording of ‘morphology’. This is an archaeologist’s way of looking at the shape and pattern of the fields and other places, and trying to interpret their origins and development. The shape of a settlement or the size and pattern of fields can indicate their history, often by analogy with other better-studied areas. Of all the broad landscape types it is the field systems generically grouped as ‘enclosures’ that required the most detailed consideration. To this end, patterns were recorded using simple terms such as ‘regular’ ‘irregular’ or ‘co-axial’.

Each type has a distinct form that can be related to its origins and development. Thus regular shaped fields are indicative of surveyed or ‘planned countryside’ like parliamentary enclosure, whereas fields more irregular in character can be an indicators of much older landscapes. The long roughly parallel lines of “co-axial” field boundaries are probably the oldest of them all.

The detailed project methodology is in Appendix 2.
A list of Buckinghamshire Historic Landscape Types was defined at the start of the project and refined as the project progressed. Once the historic landscape type had been allocated based on modern maps and aerial photographs earlier maps were also examined to detect any changes. This used a “stratigraphic” method starting with the most recent source (modern map data & aerial photographs) going back to the earliest Ordnance Survey maps of 1810-15 and the 1880s, (see page 7 for an example). Where relevant, parliamentary enclosure maps and the early county surveys undertaken by Bryant and Jeffreys were also referred to. At each stage an assessment was made whether the landscape had fundamentally changed over remained basically the same. The data was entered into the GIS database using codes to record changing landscape types:

Once mapping was complete, a summary description of each of the 55 HLTs was prepared accompanied by information on its origins, survival, rarity, distribution, contribution to landscape character and currently recognised management issues or trends.

Systematic descriptions of each Historic Landscape Type are in Appendix 1. A full list of HLT codes can be found in Appendix 2.
The illustrations to the right show the degree of landscape change to South Heath, Great Missenden, Buckinghamshire.

Modern maps, aerial photographs together with historic maps (above), are used to create classifications and landscape types seen in the interpretive GIS-based maps (below), which show he changes and alterations to landscape through time.

2003

Aerial Photograph 2003
© UK Perspectives

HLC map highlighting the influence of the 20th century on the landscape. It shows how modern settlement (red) has encroached upon the regular shaped fields (pale blue). While some enclosures show some degree of boundary loss (yellow), probably as a result of modern farming methods. The surrounding landscape is made up of older irregular enclosures and coaxial enclosures (purple) and ancient woodland (green).

1878

Ordnance Survey 1st edition 6" map 1878
© Sitescope Limited

HLC map showing the late 19th century landscape. The regular fields (pale blue) were created by a parliamentary enclosure act in the 19th century are free of modern settlement, although historic settlement (farmsteads) are shown as (brown). The ancient fields (purple) are of the same extent and woodland still remains largely unchanged and unaltered.

1811

Ordnance Survey 2" Surveyorís Drawings 1811
© British Library

HLC map showing the interpretation of landscape at the beginning of the 19th century. The area is dominated by a heath (mustard yellow), which was eventually enclosed by the Act of parliament. Although the surrounding landscape of enclosures and woodland remains relatively unchanged through two hundred years.