



Oakley Village

Landscape Character Assessment

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With photographs courtesy of Caroline Brown and Rob Musgrave

Oakley Village Landscape Character Assessment

A Landscape Character Assessment is an accepted and recognised method for understanding what the landscape is like today, how it came to be like that, and how it may change in the future. As such, it describes and classifies the recognisable and consistent pattern of elements that differentiate one landscape from another. It is its character that makes each landscape distinct and gives each area its particular sense of place.

The landscape character approach considers that all landscapes are valuable and seeks to protect their essential character. The purpose of landscape character assessment is to help ensure that change and development does not undermine whatever is characteristic or valued about a particular place, and ensure that ways of improving the character of a place can be considered.

In order to determine the Oakley Village Landscape Character Assessment, the NDP group used the principles identified in the Bedford Borough Council (BBC) Landscape Character Assessment (April 2014) pages 69-73 “**3B Oakley – Great Ouse Limestone Valley**”.

Using this as an “umbrella” document a more detailed local assessment was carried out of the village and its setting within the surrounding landscape.

The **Oakley Landscape Character Assessment** read together with the Bedford Borough LCA is therefore intended to provide a comprehensive landscape evidence base and development guidelines which will underpin future planning and development decisions in the village.

Introduction

Situated approximately 4 miles north-west of Bedford, Oakley village consists of approximately 900 dwellings, with a population of 2,500 people.

The village lies on the River Great Ouse which meanders in a large oxbow to form the northern, western and much of the southern parish boundary. Meanwhile, the eastern boundary is formed by the main A6, which separates Oakley from the neighbouring village of Clapham.

To the north east, the parish boundary crosses the A6 to incorporate Judges Spinney and the southern and eastern edge of Browns Wood before returning to re-join the River Great Ouse.

As such, Oakley is the gateway to many lovely walks along the Ouse valley.

The village is currently of sufficient population to sustain a well-used Post Office/village shop, a beauty salon, an upholsterers, a local pub, a very active sports and social club, two churches, a café, a day centre for the elderly plus a pre-school and both lower and middle schools.

Over the past 10 years, the parish council has encouraged limited growth of small industrial units at various locations in the parish which help to provide local employment for some residents.

In addition, significant additional housing development has taken place and approximately 60 new dwellings have been built in the village – a +7% increase. These developments have incorporated a number of social and low cost housing units.

Development Guidelines

The Bedford Borough Landscape Character Assessment (BBLCA) adopted in May 2014 states that ‘The overall landscape strategy for the *Oakley – Great Ouse Limestone Valley* character area is to **conserve** the historic limestone villages, the riverside features such as stone bridges and mills and the tranquil river corridor flanked by woodland belts.’

It continues, ‘Elements to be **enhanced** would be the field boundaries ..., the management/restoration of the riverside pastures/grassland ..., and the integration of recent development with the surrounding rural landscape...’

The conservation and enhancement of the character of Oakley village and surrounding area is clearly a key priority when considering future development. The areas identified for special mention are as follows

1) The River Valley



View across River Great Ouse to Oakley House

The River Great Ouse and its valley are the most dominant and important features of the surrounding landscape. Not only are these features important in terms of natural beauty but the river and its valley are also extremely important in terms of biodiversity (BBLCA – Landscape Strategy).

The BBKA landscape management guidelines state that it is important to ‘conserve, enhance and create areas of floodplain landscape with flood meadows and marshes

where appropriate' (3B.1.17). Similarly, the same guidelines recommend the need to 'conserve and enhance the riparian vegetation that defines the course of the Great River Ouse, with opportunities for enhanced habitat management and restoration' (3B.1.18).

It is of particular importance therefore that the entire river and river valley areas in the parish are protected from development and that positive action is taken to enhance the area in terms of woodland planting and habitat management in line with the recommendations in the Landscape Strategy.



View downstream to Oakley Two Bridges

The Limestone Bridges

2.1) The 'Two Bridges' approach into Oakley from Bromham.

This distinctive entrance to the village, with the lovely views across the meadows to Oakley Church, epitomises the village. Through both their picturesque setting and their historical value, with their lovely views across the meadows to Oakley Church and up and down the river, these bridges form a key part of the character of Oakley.



Oakley Church from Oakley Two Bridges

2.2) Stafford Bridge.

The BBLCA states, 'Consider views to, and the landscape setting of the limestone bridges e.g. the instance of Stafford bridge, where linear extension out of Oakley extends to within close proximity of the crossing point' (BBLCA 3B.1.25). As such, the landscape setting of the area surrounding Stafford Bridge should be protected from further development. This area should encompass both Lynch Furlong and the allotments as well as the immediate area surrounding the bridge.



Stafford Bridge

2) The approach into Oakley from Bromham

The BBLCA states, 'consider views to, and the landscape setting of the limestone bridges' (BBLCA 3B.1.25). Similarly, it also states, 'conserve views to the church towers' (BBLCA 3B.1.26).

When coupled with the need to maintain the river and surrounding landscape highlighted in 1) above, these statements identify a distinct need to both conserve and enhance the approaches to the village from both Bromham and Pavenham.

This area should include the floodplains and fields on both sides of the river on the approach to St. Mary's church, as well as the views both to and from the church. Also included should be the views to and from Oakley House, located further along the same stretch of the river.

We would urge that consideration be given to this area being designated a conservation area.

3) Long Views to and from Oakley

The protection of long views to and from the village is highlighted in section 3B.1.24 of the BBLCA, which states, 'conserve the natural floodplain landform and long views – avoid further introduction of embankments in the landscape which interrupt the landform and restrict views'.

The escarpment that runs along the village east from Westfield Road, behind the High Street and along Highfield Road up to Browns Wood provides superb views in both a northerly and southerly direction of both the north Bedfordshire villages and back towards Bedford itself.

These views are particularly stunning from the eastern end of the escarpment from areas such as Judges Spinney.

From the north, the majority of the village lies unseen behind the escarpment, leaving clear uninterrupted views of the river and surrounding countryside. Similarly, the open countryside to the west offers beautiful views across the river valley.

It is strongly recommended that future development is not permitted that will spoil these views.



Long view across River Great Ouse valley taken from Pavenham Road, Pavenham with Oakley village hidden behind escarpment.

4) Coalescence with Neighbouring Villages

The need to maintain Oakley as a separate entity, avoiding coalescence with other villages is highlighted in BBLCA (3B.1.23), which states, 'improve settlement edges to maintain separation between settlements'.

The current area of open landscape east of Station Road opposite the schools, extending from the Old Station in the north, to Lovell Road in the south, should ideally be protected from development to prevent coalescence with Clapham.



Field opposite Lincroft School provides a "Local Gap"
Between Oakley and Clapham

5) Linear Extension of Oakley

The BBCA clearly states that any future development should 'conserve the nucleated stone built villages and avoid linear extension along roads which may threaten the individual identity of the villages' (BBLCA – 3B.1.22).

This statement would question any further development of the village towards Stafford Bridge, particularly since the Planning Inspector, when agreeing to the housing development in Pavenham Road, said that "this should mark the most northerly point of linear development".

The same principle should apply to Church Lane between St. Mary's church and the two bridges, where any development would clearly detract from the entrance to the village.



View from Two Bridges along Church Lane to Oakley Church

With regard to the approach from Highfield Road, any development there would not only damage the long views highlighted above but would also only add to an already busy traffic flow.

Similarly, any developments along Lovell Road towards Clapham could be regarded as a threat to the separate identity of Oakley.

6) Conserve Rural Village Identity

The village of Oakley is situated in a rural setting and has many features that cause it to have a distinct identity. In order to conserve this identity, the following areas need to be protected.

7.1) The BBLCA (3B.1.19) states that the village should, 'conserve the hedgerow and hedgerow trees, enhancing the network where hedgerow has become degraded or damaged'.

Hedgerows are a distinct feature of the village and need to be both protected and encouraged. Any attempt to replace hedgerows with e.g. walls or fencing should be actively discouraged.

Similarly, the trees in the village should be maintained and replaced as necessary. The tree-lined nature of Church Lane is a particular feature of note.



Church Lane – hedgerows and trees are a feature of the principal roads through Oakley

7.2) The BBLCA (3B.1.21) also states that the village should, ‘conserve the rural character of the minor roads’.

It has long been recognised that the roads in the village are narrow and, at times, very busy. Despite this, it is recommended that, should development occur in the village or surrounding villages, the character of the minor roads is protected.

7.3) The BBLCA (3B.1.21) continues, ‘discourage the introduction of suburban style materials e.g. kerbs and extensive lighting’.

The use of excessive signage, often associated with suburban locations should be avoided where possible. In addition, where new features such as lighting are introduced, these should be sympathetic with the local setting, in line with the village identity.

7.4) When considering any potential development of the village, it is important that the character of the nucleated stone built village is conserved (BBLCA – 3B.1.22).

This should also take into account the very open, semi-rural character of the centre of the village, especially around the village green. The open plan front gardens and the areas of public open space e.g. Grange Close also contribute to the character of the village.

Elsewhere, semi-wooded areas of the village and the hedges lining the principal roads and enclosing front gardens provide a more rural feel to the village and should be conserved.



Open green space is a feature of our village - this is Grange Close

7) Wooded areas

There are 2 important wooded areas within the Parish of Oakley which provide open access to the public. Both are managed by Bedford Borough Council with the support of “The Friends of Browns Wood”, a group of local volunteers.

8.1) Browns Wood



Browns Wood and its “Millennium Extension”

Located approximately 1,000 metres from the centre of Oakley on the eastern edge of the parish boundary, Browns Wood and its millennium extension is situated on the highest ridge in Bedford Borough, with beautiful views west and north across the River Great Ouse.

Many church spires and towers in the surrounding villages of North Bedfordshire can be seen from this vantage point.

To the south there are views to the Greensand Ridge and over the Bedford urban area. Different parts of the wood are designated as an Ancient Woodland, Nature Reserve and a County Wildlife site.

Browns Wood and its setting is recognised in the BBLCA as part of the important Wooded Wolds a recognised landscape feature in North Bedfordshire very sensitive to development. The immediate setting around the perimeter of the woodland is also important to protect.

It is accessible from Oakley by public footpaths running along the banks of the River Great Ouse and from Highfield Road. There are also footpaths and bridleways from other surrounding villages which allow access to the woodland.

Browns Wood is extremely important in terms of biodiversity with many different varieties of birds, wildflowers, butterflies and moths.

Regularly frequented by residents of Oakley and by walkers from surrounding villages, it is highly valued as a place of beauty, quiet relaxation and tranquility.

8.2) Judges Spinney



Judges Spinney

Situated on the southern edge of Highfield Road, Judges Spinney is a small but important area of woodland accessed by a footpath from Oakley.

It is situated on the same ridge as Browns Wood with similarly impressive views to the north and north west over the River Great Ouse valley towards Milton Ernest, Sharnbrook and Pavenham.

Long views to the south take in Bedford and the Greensand Ridge.

Planted between 1826 and 1831, the trees include ash, beech (unusual in clay lands, due to the Dewponds on the ridge), elm, hornbeam, field maple and wild cherry. Friends of Browns Wood regularly work on this woodland to maintain its excellent condition.

Walkers from both Oakley and Clapham, as well as motorists who stop and have their lunch there, take advantage of the views from the edge of the Spinney. Judges Spinney is a County Wildlife site due to the rich flora that can be seen in the wood and fauna that can be heard whilst visiting the Spinney.



Important long views from Judges Spinney looking North West across the River Great Ouse valley to the Wooded Wolds of North Bedfordshire

8) Village Enhancement.

As well as conserving the identity of the village, it is important that the benefits of living in Oakley are enhanced. With regard to landscape issues, there is a clear need to enhance access to local attractions, as stated by BBLCA (3B.1.27), 'Enhance access and recreation including new river crossings, links with parks, nature reserves and local attractions'.

Specifically, the following areas should be considered.

9.1) Provide pedestrian access across the river, near to the 'two bridges'.

Currently, the only way for pedestrians to cross the river at the two bridges is via the bridges themselves. Since these are narrow, frequently very busy and have no footpath, this can be extremely dangerous. It also makes it almost impossible for a disabled person or a mother with a pushchair to cross.

A pedestrian bridge would allow safe access to the walks on the west side of the river for both villagers and ramblers who want to cross the river at this point.

9.2) Provide access to nature reserves and local attractions.

Currently, both Judges Spinney and Browns Wood are under-used as village attractions since they cannot be easily accessed on foot by a direct route from the village. The use of these natural attractions could be significantly increased through the introduction of an access path along Highfield Road up to Browns Wood.