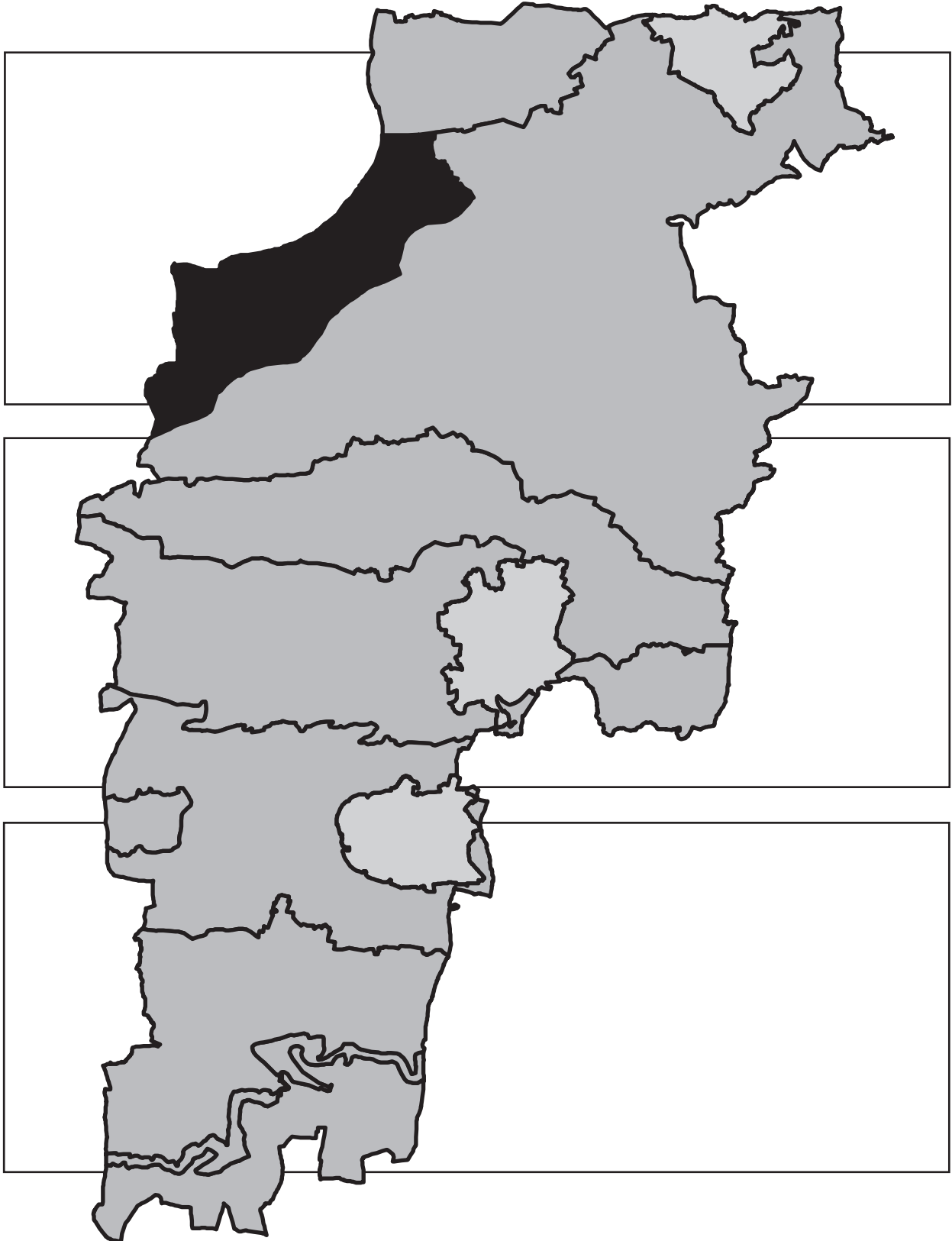


Landscape Character Area 8
Worth Forest



Worth Forest

CHARACTERISATION

Summary and key characteristics

Heavily-afforested, dissected plateau landscape enclosing a post-medieval rural landscape cut from the forest. Includes the western end of the High Weald Forest Ridge. Adjoins Crawley and the M23 Motorway.

- Densely wooded, confined, dissected plateau landscape with extensive coniferous and mixed afforestation.
- The Worth forests mark the plateau-like western end of the High Weald Forest Ridge, drained by the Rivers Mole and Ouse.
- Long views over the Low Weald to the downs but fewer long views north.
- Large, regularly-enclosed and some smaller, irregular, assart fields within a woodland setting comprising an arable and pastoral landscape enclosed by shaws, hedgerows and fencing.
- Despite the closeness of Crawley to the north, a secluded, tranquil nature exists in many parts of the forests.
- Clearance and re-planting of large tracts of ancient woodland.
- Heathland remnants and significant areas of rich woodland biodiversity.
- Spares network of ridge-top roads and lanes, droveways, tracks and footpaths.
- Sparse, dispersed settlement pattern of farmsteads.
- Bounded to the west and north by the the M23 Motorway and to the south east by the B2110.
- The London to Brighton Railway Line crosses the area via the Balcombe Tunnel.
- Sizeable hammerponds, lakes and ponds.
- Varied traditional rural buildings built with diverse materials including timber-framing, Wealden stone and varieties of local brick and tile-hanging.
- Exotic treescapes in places including rhododendron hedgerows.

Description and experience of the landscape

11.1 Worth Forest lies wholly within Mid Sussex District and the *High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty* (AONB). It comprises various forest blocks including Brantridge, Cowdray, High Beeches, Tilgate, Worth and Worthlodge Forests and Oldhouse Warren. Though quite distinct as a large, afforested plateau, the forest remains linked to the much wider ancient hunting forest remnants of which it is a part. These include St Leonard's Forest, the land between Crawley Down and Turners Hill, Paddockhurst Park and the large woodland blocks stretching over hill and vale as far south as Staplefield on the northern edge of the Ouse Valley.

11.2 The forest is part of the westernmost extension of the Hastings Beds in the High Weald. To the north, beyond Tilgate Park in Crawley Borough and Holmbush Forest in Horsham District, the Hastings Beds are faulted out against the Weald Clay, forming an abrupt edge to the steep, wooded topography of the High Weald. The landform and geology of the forest are relatively simple. The area comprises a lightly dissected

plateau of Upper Tunbridge Wells Sandstone with clay bands exposed on the sides of the shallow valleys. The forest plateau extends into Horsham District, the Holmbush Forest plateau to the north and the long ridge-and-valley sequence in St Leonards Forest to the south.

11.3 The northern and western boundaries of the forest in Mid Sussex are clearly marked by the A23 Trunk Road, its extension as the M23 Motorway and the A264 Crawley South Western Bypass. The northernmost extent of the forest lies beyond the motorway at Tilgate Park in Crawley Borough. The southern boundary of the area is formed by the crest of the Forest Ridge, marked by the B2110 running south-west from Worth Abbey to Handcross. The ridge marks the watershed between streams draining north to the River Mole and those draining south to the River Adur. The forest is wholly within the Mole catchment, its long, secluded streams cutting west-east across the plateau or south-north, through Crawley.

11.4 The woodland character of the area is based on an important reservoir of ancient woodland, much of which has been replanted as the series of coniferous and mixed plantations that comprise the forest today. However, the relict landscape of the older forest still persists, in the gill woodlands, in other semi-natural ancient woodland areas, and in features such as gnarled beech trees and beech avenues, pollarded oaks and coppiced beeches, old banks, rabbit warrens, and old shaws. Once closely associated with the woodland pattern, most of the surviving wood pasture and heathland has disappeared under the plantations.

11.5 The forest contains regular clearings of fields largely the result of forest reclamation and improvement in the 18th Century. These fields are quite different from the Wealden assarts, being large square or rectangular enclosures bounded by ditched hedges. In the forest, they persist as large blocks, generally on the gentle valley slopes, to this day surrounded by the forests on ground that refused to yield to improvement.

11.1 The forest is something of a conundrum. It can be experienced as different and special, a seemingly impenetrable forest tucked behind the Forest Ridge of the High Weald, tranquil, secluded, scenic and rather wild in places. Yet it is surrounded and crossed by the trappings of 19th and 20th Century development. It lies cheek by jowl with Crawley and the M23 Motorway, is crossed by the London to Brighton Railway Line and pylon lines and contains large blocks of regular coniferous plantations divided by forest rides. It suffers from traffic and aircraft noise. The forest therefore has a two-sided character despite its persistence as one of the most densely wooded areas in the western Weald.

Biodiversity

11.2 The rich areas of biodiversity in the forest lie in the remnant semi-natural ancient woodlands, particularly those in the gills. The area contains one Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) within the gill woodland in Cowdray Forest. It is important for a nationally uncommon alder woodland type and for its rich community of lichens. The north-western portion of Worthlodge Forest is included in an extensive Site of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCI) comprising oak and hazel woodland with birch and small-leaved lime, alder along the streams. Clearings are dominated by common grass species. The forest contains stands of beech, local areas of self-seeded Scots pine and hornbeam coppice. There are remnant and dormant wet and dry acid heathland areas and hammerponds.

Historic character

11.3 Worth Forest historically was a mosaic of heath, wood pasture and woodland rather than a continuous forest. The main task of woodland clearance in the High

Weald was accomplished in medieval times through processes of assarting and enclosure. During Tudor and Stuart period, the forest wastes shrank still further due to reclamation as farmland and the depletion of woodland stock for fuel by the Wealden iron industry. The character of the wider Worth forests changed greatly during this period, the area between the Forest Ridge and the River Ouse enclosed and divided up into numerous farmsteads.

11.4 Four centuries of clearance by no means resulted in the clearance of all the Wealden woodland in and adjoining West Sussex. Due to the infertility and barrenness of the soil, the woodlands on the Forest Ridge and the plateaux flanking it persisted as extensive forest tracts. These tracts stretched from Ashdown Forest in East Sussex, across the plateau and Forest Ridge at Worth and Tilgate, and as far west as St Leonard's Forest. It was in the 18th Century that a further assault on these remaining forest wastes was begun by land improvers when large areas of former pasture, wood pasture and forest were brought under arable cultivation. Nevertheless, the high forests continued to provide a stern challenge to these efforts. The improvement of St Leonard's and Tilgate Forests presented particularly difficult problems because of badly-drained, sloping silty clays. Even the land previously reclaimed in the forest had been neglected, often used only for rabbit-warrening.

11.5 The reclaimers of the forest wastes were large-scale operators who had varying degrees of success, the clearings of regular fields in the forest evidence of their efforts. Since the Second World War, the forests have been extensively re-planted with formal coniferous and mixed plantations which co-exist with the remnant ancient woodland.

11.6 The area contains old lanes and tracks representing a visible survival of ancient routes (*droves* or *droveways*) used for transhumance. The area was particularly important as a centre of the wealden iron industry. The landscape reveals a legacy of hammer and furnace ponds, pond bays, some furnace remains and roads associated with the industry. The area contains five non-registered mainly post-medieval parkscapes identified by the local authorities.

Settlement form and local distinctiveness

11.7 The settlement pattern of the forest is scanty, consisting almost entirely of farmsteads associated with land reclaimed from the forest. Much of the forest lies in the parish of Worth, the village of Worth and its splendid Saxon church now isolated beyond the M23 Motorway and engulfed by the neighbourhoods of Pound Hill and Maidenbower in Crawley. The hamlet of Pease Pottage lies to the west, again separated from the eastern forest by the M23 Motorway.

Strategic gap

11.8 The County Council, Mid Sussex District Council and Crawley Borough Council have long recognised pressures for development on the open land between Crawley and Pease Pottage and have designated this land as a strategic gap.

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EVALUATION

Change – key issues and trends

- Decline in traditional woodland management techniques such as coppicing.
- Extensive planting of coniferous forest on former ancient woodland.
- Spread of invasive introduced species, particularly rhododendron.
- Reduction of heathland to a few pockets due to cessation of grazing management and subsequent woodland invasion and woodland re-planting.
- Continuing pressures for urban development on the northern fringes of the area and an attendant increase in the pervasiveness of traffic movement and noise.
- Visual impact of pylon lines and modern farm buildings.
- Increasing pressures for a variety of recreational activities.
- Perceived increased traffic levels on rural roads with consequent demands for road improvements.
- Gradual loss of locally distinctive building styles and materials.
- Gradual suburbanisation of the landscape including the widespread use of exotic tree and shrub species.

Landscape and visual sensitivities

- Woodland and forest cover limits the visual sensitivity of the landscape and confers a sense of intimacy, seclusion and tranquillity.
- Large blocks of assart pastures impart breadth and depth to the scenic quality to the landscape.
- Heathland remnants and significant areas of rich woodland biodiversity are vulnerable to loss and change.
- Network of lanes, droveways, tracks and footpaths provides a rich terrain for horse-riding, cycling and walking and for the appreciation of nature.
- Sparse settlement pattern currently sits well within the rural landscape although there is a danger of the cumulative visual impact of buildings and other structures.

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MANAGEMENT

Management Objective

Conserve and enhance the secluded, tranquil nature of the forest and the agricultural landscape, and the unobtrusive settlement pattern throughout the area.

Land Management Guidelines

- Conserve the forest and its seclusion for scenic, nature conservation and recreational purposes, plan for long-term woodland regeneration, and promote a diverse mosaic of woodland types.
- Reduce the impact of forestry where possible by encouraging sensitive forestry practice including small-scale felling rotation, and incorporating mixed species.
- Maintain and restore the historic pattern and fabric of the agricultural landscape.
- Conserve, strengthen and manage existing hedgerows and hedgerow trees and re-plant hedgerows where they have been lost.
- Conserve woodland biodiversity and the landscape of the gills including wet woodland, protecting rare and uncommon woodland plant communities associated with them.
- Enhance the biodiversity of woodland rides and glades and reduce rhododendron invasion and bracken cover.
- Conserve and manage remnant open heathland by preventing the encroachment of scrub and create new, interconnected heathlands.
- Maintain and manage all lakes and ponds and their margins for their landscape diversity and nature conservation value.
- Protect the character of rural roads and manage road verges to enhance their nature conservation value.
- Minimise the effects of adverse incremental change by seeking new development of high quality that sits well within the landscape and reflects local distinctiveness.

This area is part of High Weald forests - including St Leonard's Forest - in Mid Sussex and Horsham Districts. The Management Objective and Land Management Guidelines above have been incorporated into the ***Planning and Land Management Guidelines Sheet HW2 (High Weald Forests)*** included in Part Three. As part of the set of County-wide Land Management Guidelines, the area covered by the Sheet is wider than the area of the Worth Forest in Mid Sussex and includes:

The *Worth Forest (Area 8)* Landscape Character Area in Mid Sussex District.

The *St Leonard's Forest (Area L1)* defined in the unpublished ***Horsham District Landscape Character Assessment*** (October 2003).

The *Tilgate Forest* Landscape Character Area and a small part of St Leonard's Forest at Pease Pottage (yet to be included in a Borough Assessment) in Crawley Borough.