

**Review of
Special Landscape
Areas in Kent**

Final Report



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Special Landscape Areas
in Kent
Final Report

For
Kent County Council
County Planning Department

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1 INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The Kent Structure Plan, in common with that of many other counties, identifies landscapes of both national and county level importance. Landscapes of national importance are the Kent Downs and High Weald Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs). Landscapes of county importance are the eight Special Landscape Areas (SLAs), which were first identified in the Kent Structure Plan in 1977.
- 1.2 The statutory basis for AONB designations (which are made by the Countryside Commission) is set out in the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. The key requirement is the inclusion only of land considered to be of outstanding natural beauty, which is defined in a broad sense to include not only visual quality, but also geology, topography, flora, fauna, historical and cultural aspects. The purpose of the designation is to conserve and enhance natural beauty, and this is usually achieved through a presumption against large scale development, and a special emphasis upon positive landscape management.
- 1.3 County level landscape designations are non-statutory, but the need for them is recognised in advice from the Department of the Environment. PPG7, *The Countryside and the Rural Economy* (1), states that "there are further designations, applied to other areas of the countryside... which serve to highlight particularly important features of the countryside that should be taken into account in planning decisions. These include locally devised ones, such as Areas of Great Landscape Value, which local planning authorities sometimes include in their structure or local plans to denote areas to which special countryside protection or other policies apply." In general, it is recommended that county councils, in their structure plans, identify such areas in broad strategic terms. District councils, in local plans, should then interpret and define boundaries for these areas at a local level.

THE BRIEF

- 1.4 In 1990, Kent County Council (KCC) commenced its Third Structure Plan Review. In mid-1992 a consultation draft was published (2). As part of the Structure Plan Review process, KCC decided that it should examine the case for designating an additional SLA, the Low Weald, which is considered by many to be an important and distinctive part of the Kent landscape. It sought to appoint consultants primarily to establish whether this area was of sufficient value in a county wide context to justify SLA designation. However the remit for the study also extended to a review of other areas of the county that might merit designation.
- 1.5 The specific aims of the study were:
 - to review the existing landscape designations within the county through a strategic level assessment of the landscape character and quality of SLA areas and non SLA areas;
 - to identify and assess the strategic justification (or otherwise) for further SLAs;

- to establish the general extent of any potential new SLAs, detailed boundaries for which would be defined subsequently through the district councils' local plan review process.

1.6 The brief stipulated that:

- work should include a comparative appraisal of the approach to landscape designations adopted by other south-east counties;
- the landscape assessment should be multi-dimensional, taking account of both objective and subjective factors;
- evaluation criteria should be clearly stated.

1.7 In addition to the Low Weald, the consultants were directed to look at two other specific areas which district councils had suggested as possible SLAs, namely the Stour Valley near Canterbury, and Romney Marsh in the south-east of the county.

APPROACH

1.8 Cobham Resource Consultants (CRC) was appointed in August 1992 to conduct the SLA review. CRC has extensive experience of landscape assessment, having worked in this field for many years for the Countryside Commission and a wide range of local authorities. The practice has advised on AONB and National Park designations and boundary reviews and has undertaken a review in Scotland of the effectiveness of regional landscape designations (the Scottish equivalent of SLAs). CRC recently prepared a landscape assessment and strategy for Northamptonshire, including a review of Northamptonshire SLAs. Currently, the practice is drafting new guidance for the Countryside Commission on landscape assessment methods. This will be published next year as an advisory document for practitioners.

1.9 Our approach to the SLA review has been founded on two principles. The first is that SLA designation should be based on **natural beauty**, by which we mean not only visual quality (although this will be the primary concern) but also factors such as physical, historical, ecological, architectural and cultural interest. The second is that the SLA landscapes must be of at least **county level importance**, for instance because they include landscape types or features that are unusual or rare. In the Chapter 3, we elaborate further on the criteria for SLA designation, which include both visual and more general conservation criteria.

METHODOLOGY

1.10 We began our work with a **desk study** of all existing data relating to landscape assessment and designation of SLAs in Kent, examining in particular the 1980 *Kent Countryside Local Plan: Report of Survey and Issues* (3), which sets out the original basis for the SLA designation, and the 1990 *Kent Countryside Strategy: Landscape and Nature Conservation Guidelines* (4) which classifies the county's landscapes into nine different character areas. At the same time we undertook a literature review covering:

- landscape designations in other south-east counties;
 - general guidebooks about Kent landscapes;
 - physical geography, landscape history, ecology and built environment of Kent;
 - cultural associations, such as writings and paintings that feature Kent landscapes.
- 1.11 In parallel with the desk study we prepared **overlay maps** at 1:250,000 of geology, topography, drainage, soils, woodland cover, settlements and communications. The purpose of this exercise was to familiarise ourselves with the main factors that have given rise to different types of landscape character within the county, in preparation for the initial field survey.
- 1.12 The **initial field survey** covered the whole county at a broad brush level and was carried out by a team of two landscape architects. The aims were to review the visual character and quality of the county as a whole, and the existing SLAs in particular, and at same time to identify 'areas of search' within which new SLA designations might be justified.
- 1.13 Around 25 viewpoints were visited, including several within each character area. Both objective and subjective information was recorded using a survey sheet based upon that recommended by the Countryside Commission (5) (see Appendix 1). At each viewpoint the surveyors also made notes as to whether or not the landscape appeared to meet visual criteria for SLA designation.
- 1.14 Following the initial field survey, **consultations** were held with selected organisations and individuals who have specialist knowledge of the Kent landscape. Information and views were sought on relative importance of the areas of search in a county context, focusing particularly on the non-visual dimensions of landscape such as archaeology, landscape history, ecology and the built environment. Consultees included KCC officers, English Nature, Kent Trust for Nature Conservation, the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, the Council for the Protection of Rural England, the Weald of Kent Preservation Society and Romney Marsh Research Trust.
- 1.15 Finally, a **detailed field survey** of the areas of search was conducted. This used the same survey form as the initial field survey, but a much greater number of survey points was visited, around 30 in total, split between the six areas of search. This time the purpose of the survey was to assess on visual grounds whether specific areas should or should not be included in any potential new SLA. This assessment, together with the information gathered from the desk study and consultations, provided the basis for recommendations as to the location and extent of new SLAs.

STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

- 1.16 This report, which presents the findings of the SLA review, is structured as follows. **Chapter 2** looks at Kent landscapes in a national and regional context, describing formative influences and distinctive aspects of the county's landscape character. **Chapter 3** explores the meaning of the SLA designation. It reviews the approach to landscape designations adopted by other south-east counties. It examines the original criteria for designation, and presents recommended criteria for use in the present SLA review. It also gives details of likely structure plan policy for the

SLAs. Chapter 4 quickly reviews the county's landscape character areas. It considers how the existing SLAs fit within the character areas, and how their quality measures up to the designation criteria. Chapter 5 examines the areas of search for potential new SLA designations. Each area of search is systematically assessed against the designation criteria, and its landscape quality is also broadly compared with that of the existing SLAs. In Chapter 6, recommendations are made as to the location and extent of new SLAs.

2 KENT LANDSCAPES IN A NATIONAL AND REGIONAL CONTEXT

- 2.1 The county of Kent has one of the most diverse landscapes in lowland Britain. It is widely known as the 'Garden of England', and also as Britain's main gateway to the continent. Indeed, these two perceptions are quite accurate, for the county has the greatest concentration of orchards, hops and market gardening in any of the home counties. Its landscape character is also subtly different from other English counties, and is said by some to have a continental feel. The paragraphs that follow outline some of the most important influences on the formation of the Kent landscape, and attempt to draw out those characteristics that are specially distinctive.

PHYSICAL AND HUMAN INFLUENCES

- 2.2 A key determinant of the county's landscape character is the underlying **geology**. Kent occupies the north-eastern part of the Wealden anticline, an elongated dome-shaped area of uplift with its axis trending from west to east across Surrey, Sussex and Kent. Rocks from the centre of the anticline have been stripped off to reveal the older underlying rocks. The more resistant strata form a succession of inward facing escarpments, separated by vales developed on the weaker strata.
- 2.3 South to north across Kent the dominant strata, which in turn influence **topography**, are the relatively resistant Hastings Beds (a mix of sands and clays) which underlie the High Weald; the low-lying Weald Clay; the Lower Greensand, Gault and Upper Greensand which form a south-facing ridge overlooking the Weald; the parallel south-facing Chalk escarpment of the North Downs; the Oldhaven, Woolwich and Thanet Beds, sandstones which lie under the north Kent plain; and the London Clay beneath the north Kent marshes. In addition, extensive low-lying coastal areas in north Kent and at Romney Marsh are covered with recent alluvial and marine deposits. The shingle deposits at Dungeness are the most extensive in Europe, and have been laid down since Saxon times.
- 2.4 The main **river systems** of the county are the Darent, Medway and Great Stour, all of which flow northwards and have cut through the Greensand and Chalk; and the Rother, which follows the county boundary in the south and drains the High Weald south-eastwards to the Channel.
- 2.5 There is a wide range of **soil types** within the county, reflecting the varied geology. In general, the most productive soils are the loams that occur on the Greensands, on the Oldhaven, Woolwich and Thanet Beds, and on the alluvium of north Kent and Romney Marsh. The higher ground of the North Downs tends to have thinner, poorer soils; while much of the Weald has heavy and poorly drained soils. The exception is the central part of the Weald, flanking the Medway, where the clays are overlain with alluvium and noticeably lighter soils occur.
- 2.6 From the standpoint of **ecology** Kent has been described as 'one of the richest counties in the British Isles' (6). Many elements of both the flora and fauna of the county are unusual if not unique in Britain. Past physical links with the continent, and continued proximity, have tended to increase species diversity. The very wide range of habitat types that exists has also contributed to the county's ecological interest. Of special value are the

extensive semi-natural and often ancient woodlands of the High Weald and elsewhere, many of which include sweet chestnut coppice; the chalk grasslands of the North Downs; and the sea marshes, mud flats and shingle of North Kent, Sandwich Bay and Romney Marsh which are notable for their populations of wild fowl and waders and for their variety of passage migrants.

- 2.7 Kent was certainly inhabited in prehistoric times but it is unlikely that any extensive human settlement or clearance of the primeval forest took place until the Neolithic period at the earliest. Light, easily worked soils in the north of the county were probably cleared first. In Roman and Saxon times the whole area south of the North Downs was still covered by dense forest which acted as a severe barrier to communications, and this pattern persisted, in the Low Weald for instance, right up until the Norman Conquest. Then, in early medieval times, villages outside the area began to take and clear sections of the Wealden Forest for the keeping of pigs and cutting of timber. Such areas of forest were often called 'dens' and their location can still be traced today through place names ending in 'den'. In many areas fields were enclosed from the start. The medieval open field system, as practised in the Midlands, was never important in Kent, and rural population was less strongly nucleated. The land holding pattern was mainly one of small farms. In Romney Marsh, human settlement had a particularly strong and unusual influence on the landscape, as reclamation and drainage work from Saxon times onwards was instrumental in the creation of the land itself.
- 2.8 Roman and other early communications within Kent tended to run east-west along the lighter soils and ridgelines, from London to the Channel ports. North-south roads across the Weald were fewer in number, primarily because of the poor and difficult ground conditions; and this pattern survives today. The coming of the railways, however, opened up the central part of the county. The South Eastern Railway, completed in 1844, connected London, Tonbridge, Ashford, Folkestone and Dover. It not only encouraged development within the Weald, but put the area within reach of the London markets for agricultural produce.
- 2.9 Land use within the county includes a wide diversity of crops and livestock, but orchards and hops are especially important, with around half of England's production traditionally coming from Kent. Soft fruit, vegetables and potatoes are also widely grown. Hence the county well deserves the title 'Garden of England'. Horticultural production is concentrated, though, in those areas where the climate and soils are particularly favourable. In the case of fruit, the main growing areas are the Weald and the Greensand belt near the Medway (where the lighter soils occur) and north Kent. Hops are similarly distributed, with perhaps an even stronger concentration in the Weald. Livestock farming in Kent is characterised by relatively high numbers of sheep and lambs, especially within Romney Marsh, a traditional sheep rearing area, but also in the eastern half of the Weald, where heavy, poorly drained soils are unsuitable for arable use (7).

KENT'S DISTINCTIVE LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

- 2.10 These formative influences on the Kent landscape have given rise to a distinctive landscape character or 'sense of place' which is clearly recognisable by most people, although difficult to define. Few landscape

features are unique to the county, but there are particular **patterns and combinations** of landscape features that are unusual and highly valued.

- 2.11 In general, Kent is considered a **well wooded** county, with much ancient woodland. The wooded area, at around 11%, is around double the national average. Approximately 75% of the woodlands are on ancient sites, and 55% are ancient woodland, defined as having been continuously wooded since 1600. Much of the woodland is concentrated on the steeper slopes, particularly the scarp faces of the North Downs and the Greensand ridge. Even in areas such as the Low Weald where the woodland cover as such is fairly low, the landscape appears well wooded, as there are many dense hedgerows and shaws - often remnants of ancient woodlands.
- 2.12 Set within this wooded framework, is a productive, fruitful, small scale landscape of **orchards and hop gardens**. These highly visible landscape features, which are particularly common in Kent, are prominent in public perceptions of the county, but in fact a whole range of other features also contributes to the county's image as the 'Garden of England'. These include oast houses, vineyards, cob nuts, sweet chestnut coppice and shelterbelt plantings of pleached alder and poplar. The overall effect is to create a landscape that in many ways resembles parts of northern France.
- 2.13 By contrast with inland areas, the county's coasts are characterised by extensive, low-lying **coastal grazing marshes**. Their presence reflects the fact that much of north Kent and the Romney area have only been reclaimed from the sea fairly recently. Indeed in Roman times Thanet was an island and much of Romney Marsh did not exist. This marshland, which features flat, open landscapes, sheep grazing, dykes, mudflats and huge skies, is relatively rare: nowhere else in southern England are such large coastal marshes found.



3 THE MEANING OF THE SPECIAL LANDSCAPE AREA DESIGNATION

GENERAL RATIONALE

- 3.1 County level landscape designations such as Special Landscape Area (SLA) and Area of Great Landscape Value (AGLV) are very variable across the country, but it is probably fair to say that the majority of county structure plans contain some designation of this kind. Most county level landscape designations were made in the late 1970s or early 1980s when the first round of county structure plans was prepared. The methods and criteria for designation are often poorly documented, but in general the areas were identified on the basis of field survey by the county's landscape or countryside staff, and were considered to represent the 'best' of the county's landscapes, within which conservation of natural beauty should be a priority. In practice county level landscape designations are mainly used to indicate broad areas of constraint upon development, and unlike AONBs, seldom form a basis for positive landscape management initiatives.
- 3.2 In recent years the emphasis in landscape assessment and management has in fact tended to move away from 'special' areas to the wider countryside. For instance, the Countryside Commission, in *Caring for the Countryside* (8), its policy agenda for the 1990s, states that:
- "The countryside should be seen as a whole: all parts have a contribution to make to its attractiveness. Policies for the protection and management of specific areas should not lead to the sacrifice of other areas to inappropriate or unrestricted development."
- 3.3 This change in emphasis has been recognised in many counties, including Kent, through the preparation of informal county-wide landscape assessments and strategies which classify the landscape into different character areas, without attempting to evaluate their relative landscape quality. Such assessments usually aim to define the local landscape's 'sense of place', and to build upon the best aspects of its character by adopting a strategy of conservation, restoration or enhancement, as appropriate.
- 3.4 Nonetheless the principle of giving special protection to the highest quality county landscapes is still widely accepted and applied by many counties. To be successful, county landscape designations need to be meaningful to the lay person, in terms of the extent and reasons for designation. It is also important that designations should not be applied too widely, otherwise they will tend to be devalued, and pressures upon non-designated countryside will be increased.

LANDSCAPE DESIGNATIONS IN OTHER SOUTH-EAST COUNTIES

- 3.5 The position in relation to landscape designations in other south-east counties is quite varied as obviously each county not only has different types of landscape, but different development pressures. We undertook a quick review of the nature and extent of national and county landscape designations in a number of other south-east counties to help put the Kent situation in context. The findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Landscape Designations in Other South-East Counties

	AONB area	Additional area with county landscape designation	Total designated area
Kent	33%	17%	50%
East Sussex	63%	-	63%
West Sussex	51%	-	51%
Surrey	30%	5%	35%
Hampshire	22%	-	22%
Essex	3%	49%	52%

- 3.6 In **East Sussex**, which adjoins Kent to the south-west and shares with Kent its Wealden landscapes, a very large proportion of the county is AONB. No county level landscape designations have ever been made, primarily because it is felt that these might tend to increase development pressures on non-designated areas within the county. However, this stance will be reassessed in 1993 as part of the county's structure plan review. A similar position prevails in **West Sussex**.
- 3.7 In **Surrey**, where the structure plan has just been replaced, around a third of the county is covered by AONB, with an AGLV designation extending over a somewhat wider area. The position in Surrey is somewhat complicated by the fact that around 90% of the county is within the Metropolitan Green Belt.
- 3.8 In **Hampshire**, which is experiencing significant development pressures (especially for housing), the unusual decision has recently been taken to abandon county level landscape designations, which together with the AONBs formerly covered at least 80% of the county. This is perhaps an example of the way in which a designation may be devalued if its extent is too great. Previous policies for Areas of Particular Landscape Importance have been replaced by a strong blanket policy aimed at protecting landscape quality in all areas of the county.
- 3.9 Finally in **Essex**, where the extent of AONB is very small indeed, it is interesting to note that almost half of the county is covered by an SLA designation.
- 3.10 From this analysis it can be seen that the extent of existing landscape designations in Kent is not unreasonable. AONB covers around a third of the county, and SLA extends to a further 17%, so that overall around half of the county is designated. A modest expansion of SLA areas - if judged to be appropriate - should not undermine the principle of SLA designation.

CRITERIA FOR SPECIAL LANDSCAPE AREA DESIGNATION

- 3.11 The original basis for the SLA designation in Kent is described in the *Kent Countryside Local Plan: Report of Survey and Issues (3)*. Briefly, this report chose as its criteria for designation a number of indicators of landscape quality, namely:
- contrast and diversity in relief and land cover;
 - scarcity or rarity;
 - a sense of remoteness;
 - historical, traditional or cultural associations;
 - visual attractiveness.
- 3.12 Areas suitable for SLA designation were assessed using a combination of a quantitative 'scoring' system (the Tandy system) and subjective judgement. Subjective judgement was applied particularly in the decision to include coastal grazing marshes (namely the North Kent Marshes and Sandwich Bay/Pegwell Bay) among the SLAs. These areas did not score highly in terms of contrast and diversity, but were deemed to be rare and special.
- 3.13 More recent work on landscape evaluation (9) has tended to downplay the utility of quantitative methods which can sometimes generate results that are at odds with common sense, professional judgement and public preference. Instead it is recommended that evaluation should be based on a preliminary landscape classification, followed by careful, systematic judgements using an explicitly stated set of criteria.
- 3.14 For county level landscape designations, we would recommend the following criteria, which are generally accepted by the Countryside Commission and have been applied successfully in other counties:
- the landscape should be a resource of at least **county importance**, for reasons of rarity, representativeness, or variety;
 - it should be of **high scenic quality**, with pleasing patterns and combinations of landscape features, and important aesthetic or intangible factors;
 - the landscape within the area generally should be **unspoilt** by large scale, visually intrusive industry or other inharmonious development;
 - it should have a distinctive and common character, including **topographic and visual unity** and a clear sense of place;
 - in addition to its scenic qualities, it should include other notable **conservation interests**, such as features of at least county level historical, wildlife or architectural interest;
 - there should be a **consensus** of both professional and public opinion as to its importance, for example as reflected through writings and paintings about the area.
- 3.15 It can be seen that these criteria are broadly in accordance with those used in the original designation process. The majority of the criteria are based upon the area's visual interest, and this clearly carries the greatest weight. However, some importance is also attached to other conservation

interests, and to public preference. Ideally an SLA should meet all these criteria, but a case may still be made for designating an area that fails on one criterion, if there are strong grounds for inclusion on all the other factors.

STRUCTURE PLAN POLICY FOR SPECIAL LANDSCAPE AREAS

- 3.16 As part of the Third Structure Plan Review, KCC proposes to revise its policy for the SLAs (2). The relevant policy, ENV3, will relate to both the AONBs and the wider SLAs, which are defined as including the AONBs. The section that refers to areas that are SLA only states that:

"The Local Planning Authorities will provide long-term protection for these areas through local plans and development control, and will normally give priority to the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty, including landscape, wildlife and geological features, over other planning considerations."

- 3.17 This is the policy that can be expected to apply to any new SLAs that may be designated.

4 THE EXISTING LANDSCAPE FRAMEWORK

- 4.1 In addition to the criteria for SLA designation defined in the previous chapter, it is obviously important that any new SLAs should fit sensibly and logically within the existing landscape framework for the county. This comprises two elements:
- the landscape character areas for the county, as described in the *Kent Countryside Strategy: Landscape and Nature Conservation Guidelines* (4);
 - the existing SLAs, as described in the *Kent Countryside Local Plan: Report of Survey and Issues* (3), representing the areas of best landscape quality in the county.
- 4.2 In our initial desk study and field survey, we familiarised ourselves with the landscape character areas identified by KCC. We also considered how the existing SLAs fit within the character areas, and how their quality measures up to the designation criteria, bearing in mind that any new SLA should be at least equal in landscape quality to the existing SLAs. The findings of this first stage of the assessment are presented below. Due to time constraints, the work focused primarily on the visual aspects of landscape character and quality, with only limited attention being given to other conservation interests or to cultural perceptions of the landscape.

THE CHARACTER AREAS

- 4.3 In general, we found the nine landscape character areas identified by KCC (see Figure 1) very helpful and comprehensive. They are described fully in the *Kent Countryside Strategy: Landscape and Nature Conservation Guidelines*, so only a brief summary of their character is given here.

The High Weald

- 4.4 This area, in the south-west of the county, is mainly AONB, with a band of SLA along its northern boundary. The underlying geology of the Hastings Beds is overlain by a mix of silt and clay soil types. The landform rises to around 130m, with deep, incised valleys cut by many small streams. The heavy, poorly drained soils discouraged early clearance and many areas, especially the higher ground and ridgelines, are still covered with dense deciduous woodland of oak, ash and hawthorn, often with hornbeam, hazel and sweet chestnut coppice. To the east of Tunbridge Wells is a major fruit and hop growing area. Vernacular buildings, including timber-framed houses and oast houses, abound within the High Weald. The numerous small towns and villages are generally of very high visual quality.

The Low Weald

- 4.5 This low-lying and broad clay vale forms a west-east band across the county, and at present is not covered by any landscape designations. It lies north of the High Weald, and south of the Greensand ridge. Both areas have long views across the Low Weald, and their ridgelines provide visual containment. Slow flowing rivers, including the Medway and Beult, meander across the area, which is poorly drained, with many small fields

of permanent pasture, and a particular concentration of farm ponds. Although woodland cover is less dense than in the High Weald, there is a strong matrix of tall hedgerows and mature hedgerow trees. There are subtle changes in character across the area. Larger woodlands dominated by oak occur west of Tonbridge and east of Tenterden. In the central Low Weald, near the Medway Valley, there are orchards and hop gardens. Settlements are concentrated along the Tonbridge to Ashford railway line, and in the area west of Staplehurst tend to intrude visually upon the wider landscape.

The Lower Greensand

- 4.6 This belt of countryside extends across the centre of the county from Sevenoaks in the west to Folkestone in the east. In the west it falls partly within the North Downs AONB; and elsewhere much of the south-facing scarp, which at its highest in the west reaches around 250m, has been designated as SLA. The dip slope falls away to the north before the land rises steeply again at the North Downs scarp. The valley between the two scarps acts as a major transport corridor and contains the large built up areas of Sevenoaks, Maidstone and Ashford, the influence of which extends into surrounding countryside. The landscape is most wooded in the west. Around Maidstone is a fruit growing area. In the east, the topography becomes softer and flatter before forming a low scarp on the northern edge of Romney Marsh. This scarp indicates a former shoreline.

The North Downs

- 4.7 The North Downs are formed of Chalk, with extensive drift deposits of clay with flints on most areas except the scarp face and the numerous dry valleys that are carved into the dip slope. Almost all of this character area is either AONB or SLA. Like the Greensand ridge, the Downs reach a height of over 200m in the west, but the scarp is more continuous and distinctive with long distance views to both north and south. Scarp woodlands serve to emphasise the landform, and on the crest of the scarp are found areas of open chalk grassland of great ecological value. Elsewhere within this character area there are strong blocks of woodland, coppice and hedgerows, dominated by ash, oak, sweet chestnut and hazel. Land use is a mixture of pasture and arable land, the latter occurring mainly in the east. At Rochester, the North Downs are bisected by the River Medway with its associated transport routes, industry and mineral extraction.

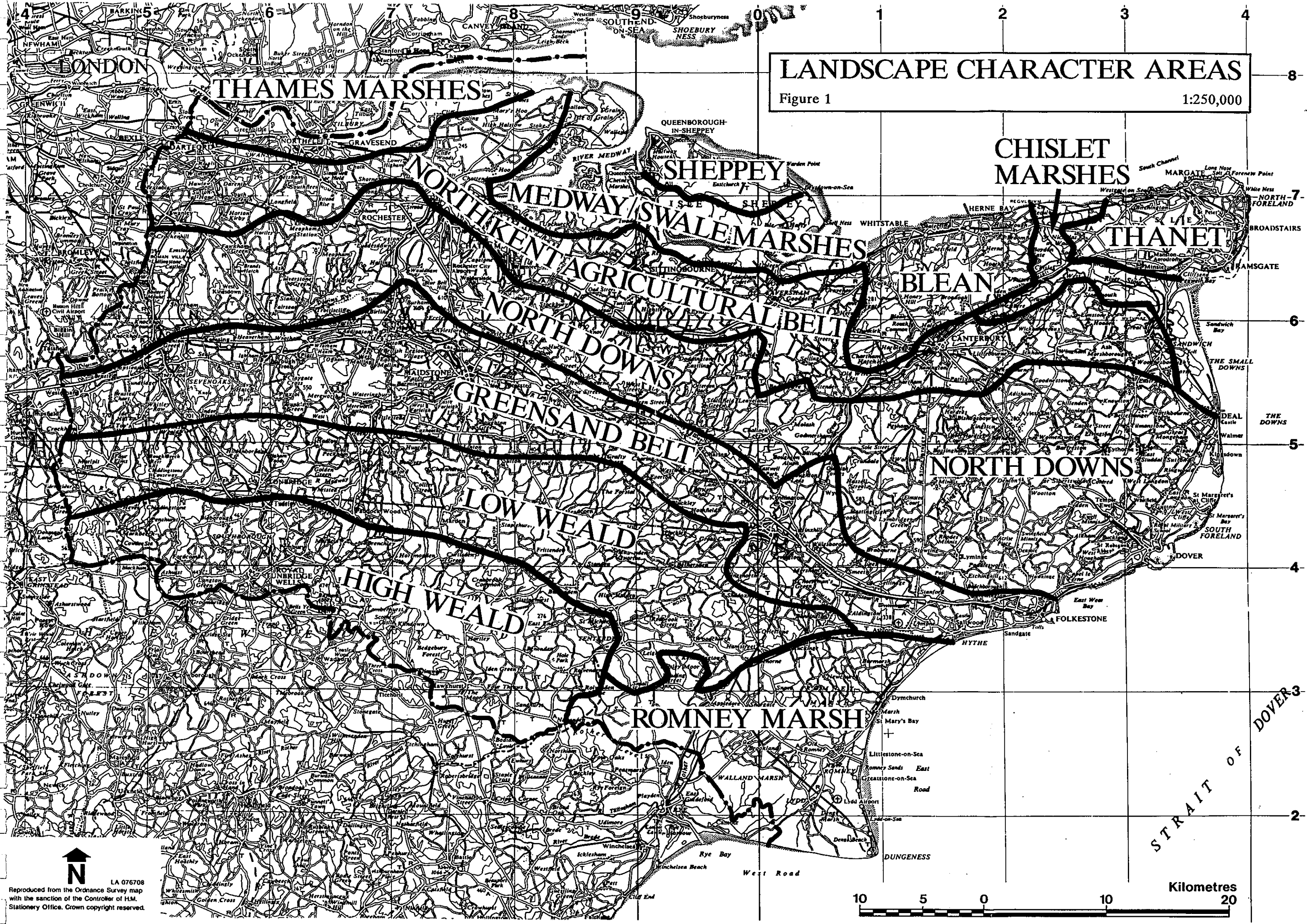
The Northern Agricultural Belt

- 4.8 Lying upon the fine loam soils formed by the Oldhaven, Woolwich and Thanet Beds, this is one of the most productive agricultural areas in Kent. In general, it is not a designated landscape. The landform is fairly low, but is rolling and undulating. In the east the Great Stour Valley south-west of Canterbury is an important feature. The landscape is open by Kent standards, with a high proportion of arable land. In the west there is extensive and visually prominent urban and industrial development along the A2. The centre is a major fruit growing area, and the east is primarily market gardening. Small woodland blocks, shelterbelts and copses are scattered across this landscape.

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREAS

Figure 1

1:250,000



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Kilometres
10 5 0 10 20



The Blean

- 4.9 The Blean is a mainly woodland area, on London Clay north of Canterbury. Much of the area has been designated as an SLA. The topography consists of low, rolling ridgelines trending south-west to north-east. It owes its woodland cover to heavy, acid soils, which are difficult to work. Hornbeam and oak coppice dominate the northern woodlands, while chestnut is more common in the south. Within the woodland are small areas of pasture and arable land. Extensive urban areas and transport routes along the coast (such as at Whitstable) intrude upon the area's northern edge, and have been excluded from the SLA.

Sheppey

- 4.10 This character area, which is undesignated, includes only the northern, higher part of the island, which viewed from the south appears as a long undulating skyline ridge above the north Kent marshes. Like the Blean, the area has heavy soils formed from the London Clay, but its exposure to salt winds among other factors means that it is lacking in significant tree cover. Land cover is mainly small arable fields and hedgerows. Urban areas, chalet and caravan parks are found along the northern coast and tend to detract from the area visually.

Thanet

- 4.11 Thanet is located on an outlier of Chalk in north-east Kent, and was formerly an island, separated from mainland Kent by a channel along the line of the lower Stour Valley and Chislet Marshes. Land use is predominantly arable, and there is little tree cover. The coastline is heavily developed around Margate, Broadstairs and Ramsgate, and is marked by bold chalk cliffs. Again, it is undesignated.

The Coastal Marshes

- 4.12 This last character area includes four geographically separate marshes, that share many common features. All are flat, open landscapes sited on alluvial or marine deposits and characterised by dykes, mudflats and reedbeds.
- 4.13 In north Kent, the marshes have a very distinctive exposed character. The **Thames Marshes** in the west form a varied landscape, heavily influenced by industrial and urban development at Dartford and Gravesend and by nearby shipping and port development. The **Medway and Swale Marshes** are more sheltered and are especially dominated by extensive mudflats and reedbeds with a very rich bird life. Much of this area has been designated as an SLA. **Chislet Marshes**, west and south of Thanet, was once a traditional landscape of pasture, dykes and copses. Large areas have been converted to arable use, although a strong hedgerow structure survives. The eastern part of Chislet Marshes, around Sandwich Bay, is an SLA.
- 4.14 **Romney Marsh** is the largest coastal marsh, and as mentioned earlier, it is mainly the product of reclamation from the sea. Originally sheep pasture, in the last twenty to thirty years it has been subject to widespread drainage and improvement, so that much of the land is now in arable use. The landscape is very open, except in the immediate vicinity of buildings and settlements. The extensive and unique area of shingle around

Dungeness Point is an SLA, but is affected visually by the Dungeness power stations and by widespread gravel extraction.

THE EXISTING SPECIAL LANDSCAPE AREAS

- 4.15 Our review of the existing SLAs generally confirmed that they are the 'best' landscapes in the county, with most SLAs meeting the majority of the criteria set out in Chapter 3. The main reasons why each area has been designated are summarised below. For one or two areas we have some reservations about the designation, mainly due to visual intrusion by built development close by. The location of the existing AONB and SLA areas is shown in **Figure 2**.

High Weald

- 4.16 Most of the High Weald is AONB, and hence has been formally recognised as a landscape of national importance. The single most important landscape characteristic is the very extensive, often ancient deciduous woodland, much of which has remained under traditional management, and is of considerable wildlife value. Also important are the area's deeply incised valleys or 'ghylls'. In addition, there are many distinctive 'Kentish' landscape features, including orchards and hop gardens. SLA protection extends beyond the northern fringe of the AONB, bringing in additional areas of High Weald character, and several important country houses and gardens such as Sissinghurst. This northern fringe is also valuable for its long views across the Low Weald to the Greensand ridge and the Downs. The area readily meets all the criteria for SLA designation.

Old Romney Shoreline

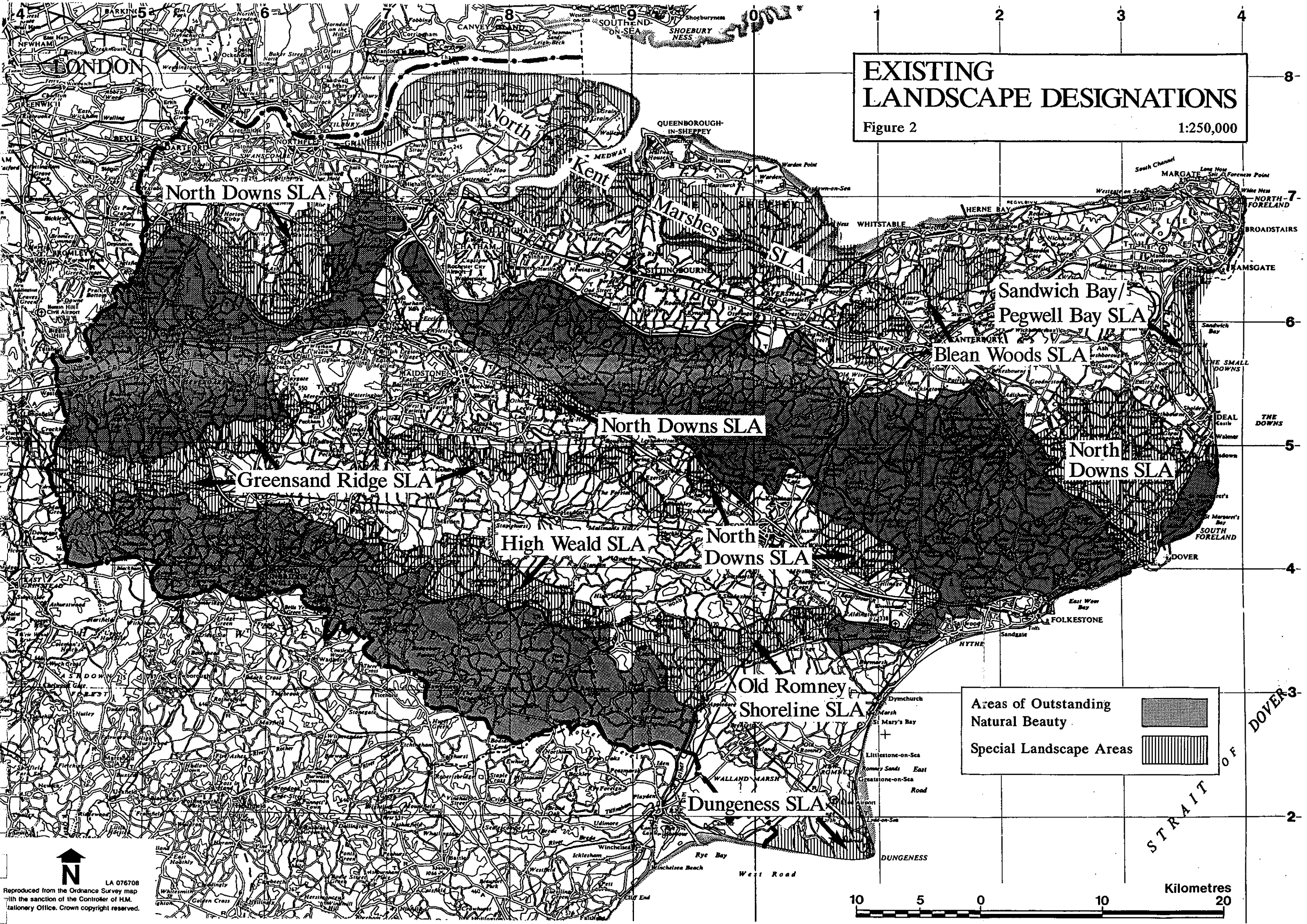
- 4.17 This area of countryside forms a backdrop to Romney Marsh, and acts as a link between the High Weald and the North Downs. It is a gently rolling landscape with a strong woodland and hedgerow structure. There are wide views over the marsh below. The former cliff line lends topographic and visual unity, and the landscape is generally unmarred by large scale development. As well as being of geological interest, the area is of historical importance, as the Royal Military Canal, a relic of the Napoleonic Wars, lies at the base of the cliff line. The landscape is certainly of county importance for these reasons, although perhaps not outstanding in visual terms.

Greensand Ridge

- 4.18 This is a dramatic landscape of very high scenic quality. The SLA forms part of the Kent Downs AONB in the west, then to the east of the Medway follows the scarp face of the Lower Greensand to near Ashford. There is extensive broadleaved woodland (especially in the west), and views southwards over the Low Weald are often stunning. Like the Weald, this area shows many distinctive 'Kentish' landscape features such as orchards and chestnut coppice. The ridge is prominent visually, and though currently unspoilt, any large scale development could cause visual intrusion over a wide area.

EXISTING LANDSCAPE DESIGNATIONS

Figure 2 1:250,000



Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Special Landscape Areas

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North Downs

- 4.19 The escarpment of North Downs is probably the most striking landscape feature of the county, and this is reflected in the designation of a wide belt of land, stretching right across the county, as an AONB. Fringing areas of SLA extend southwards in the vicinity of Maidstone and Ashford; and northwards around West Kingsdown in the west and Dover in the east, where dip slope dry valleys occur. The importance of these chalkland landscapes is linked to the national conservation interest of the scarp face woodlands and grasslands, and to the area's recreational value. The Pilgrims' Way follows the escarpment and offers excellent views to the south especially. Although mineral extraction and other development intrudes upon the Medway Valley, most other areas are unspoilt. The fringing SLA areas are not only valuable in their own right, but provide the landscape setting for several major towns.

Blean Woods

- 4.20 Blean Woods is one of the few remaining very heavily wooded parts of Kent, including areas of ancient and well managed woodland and wood pasture. Such large woodlands are unusual in close proximity to the sea and this creates a distinctive sense of place. The designation is based primarily upon the area's unspoilt woodland character, which is certainly unique within Kent.

North Kent Marshes

- 4.21 The North Kent Marshes have a special and unusual character, which is rare in a county, if not a national context. Their character may be described as wild, untamed and remote - and seems to be highly valued by many members of the public. Ironically this character is accentuated by contrast with the busy Thames estuary and extensive built up areas that occur close by. The area itself is unspoilt, although it is seen against a backdrop of industry across the Thames and at the Isle of Grain, with its oil terminal and power stations. The marshes themselves are of national or indeed international wildlife interest. Hence, notwithstanding the visual intrusion from outside the area, the marshes' special landscape interest is fairly clear.

Sandwich Bay/Pegwell Bay

- 4.22 Sandwich Bay and Pegwell Bay demonstrate many of the same features as the North Kent Marshes. They form an open and relatively unspoilt landscape, with a similar sense of remoteness and a distinctive character. However, this SLA is much smaller and therefore less robust than the North Kent Marshes, especially since there is visual intrusion from Richborough power station and other industrial development just outside the area. The character of the area is also adversely affected by golf course development.

Dungeness

- 4.23 Dungeness SLA, at the southerly tip of Romney Marsh, is undoubtedly unique in geological terms, as the largest shingle foreland in Europe. There is a real sense of isolation and remoteness, especially along the coast. The shingle beaches, ridges and salt marsh support a variety of interesting habitats, some of which are probably of international importance. However, in visual terms the area is wholly dominated by the

power stations, associated transmission lines, and active gravel workings directly adjacent to the SLA. Some may suggest that this overriding influence should have precluded the area's designation as an SLA, despite its obviously high conservation value.

5 THE AREAS OF SEARCH

- 5.1 'Areas of search' for new SLA designations were based firstly on guidance from KCC, asking us to focus on the Low Weald, the Stour Valley, and Romney Marsh. Subsequently, in the course of the initial field survey, which covered the whole county, we identified a number of other areas that seemed broadly to meet the SLA criteria. Later, during consultations, various additional areas were put forward by consultees, and where these seemed to be in line with the SLA criteria, they too were investigated. The 'shortlisted' areas of search that were covered in the detailed field survey are shown in Figure 3. Data on conservation interest and cultural perceptions were also collated.
- 5.2 The paragraphs that follow provide a general description of each area of search, under the headings of:
- formative influences;
 - landscape and visual interest;
 - conservation interest, including historical, wildlife and architectural features;
 - cultural perceptions.

THE LOW WEALD

Formative Influences

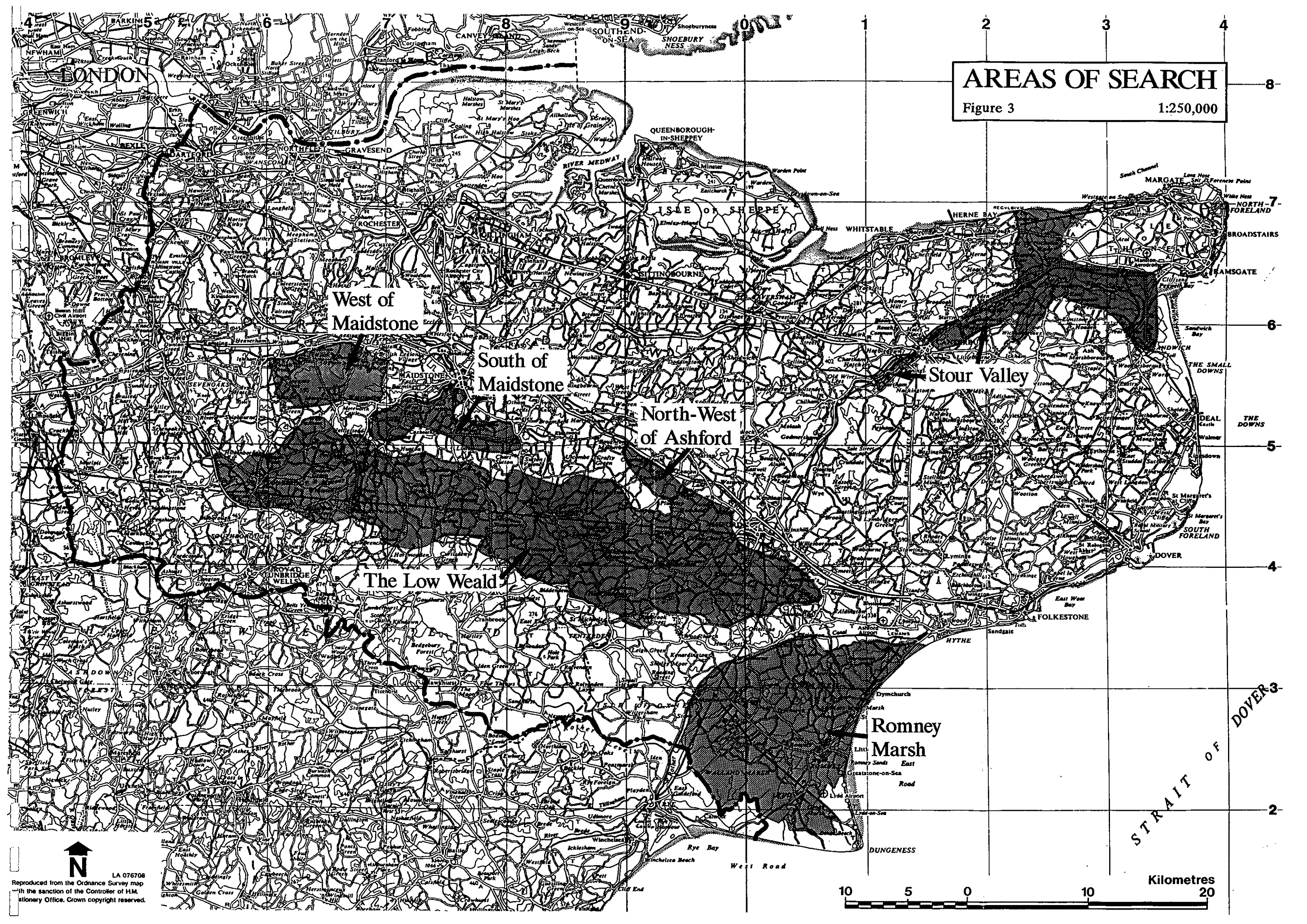
- 5.3 The Low Weald area of search extended from Tonbridge in the west to Aldington in the east. The most notable influence upon the formation of this landscape has been the heavy, poorly drained clay soils, which impeded communications and early clearance for agriculture. Hence, unlike many other parts of Kent, the Low Weald was not settled until medieval times and has never been very prosperous agriculturally. It has few large farms or estates, although there is much fine domestic architecture dating from the medieval period. In many areas field sizes are small and may represent the original enclosures from woodland. Communications are still very poor and the area is characterised by many small winding roads. Major routes through the area all run north-south, often representing former drove roads. There are virtually no good east-west routes, as these tended to follow the better drained ridgelines to north and south. The railway opened the western Low Weald up to urban and industrial development and market gardening, but the eastern Low Weald was much less affected. Here, large areas remain unimproved, with extensive sheep grazing. Although not as well wooded as many other parts of Kent, the small enclosures and tall, dense hedgerows and copses of the Low Weald create a wooded feel, both within the area, and in views from the High Weald and the Greensand ridge.

Landscape and Visual Interest

- 5.4 Detailed survey work revealed four rather different types of landscape character within the Low Weald. Although many landscape features are common to the area as a whole, there are subtle differences between west and east, and the degree of visual intrusion by built development varies.

- 5.5 In the west, from **Tonbridge to Staplehurst**, is an area of very varied land cover. There is a mix of arable land, pasture, orchards and hop fields. No single land use can be said to dominate. The landform is rolling, and visual containment is afforded by the ridges of the High Weald and Greensand to south and north respectively. Field sizes are generally large and in parts the landscape is quite open. Hedgerow and woodland cover is variable, with isolated mature or overmature hedgerow trees, somewhat patchy hedgerows, and small copses. The dominant species of hedgerow tree is oak, but poplar shelterbelts and riverside willows are also common. There are many fine vernacular buildings, including oast houses, dotted throughout the area and a number of attractive village settlements, such as Yalding. However, other settlements have either been spoiled by industrial development (for example East Peckham) or subject to extensive post-war housing development that is out of keeping with traditional village character and has had a 'suburbanising' effect (for example Paddock Wood). Other detractors include large scale modern agricultural buildings, ribbon development along main roads, and degraded urban fringe land around the larger settlements. In general the scenic quality of this area is not specially high, although there are many individual landscape features that are distinctively Kentish, and some small unspoilt areas such as the fruit growing area between Collier Street and Marden.
- 5.6 To the east, from **Staplehurst to Headcorn**, the landscape gradually becomes flatter and more enclosed, with fewer orchards and hop gardens, more pasture and sheep grazing, and stronger hedgerows. In places there is a parkland feel to this area, although some landscape elements are in poor condition (for example hedges are often gappy). The landscape is generally unspoilt, and there are many vernacular farmsteads and villages such as Frittenden. However, there is also localised visual intrusion from unsympathetic modern infill. The influence of the mainline railway, with commuter stations at both Staplehurst and Headcorn, is clearly felt, although built development is not as extensive as further west. This area may be regarded as a transition zone between the western and eastern halves of the Low Weald.
- 5.7 From **Headcorn to east of Bethersden** is an extensive area with a consistent lowland pastoral character. The landform is flat or gently rolling, and numerous small streams meander across the landscape (both the Beult and the Great Stour have their headwaters in the eastern Low Weald). There is very strong containment by large mature hedgerows and shaws; and hedgerows are punctuated by fine mature trees (mainly oak). Many of these woodland features may be remnants of the ancient forest, from which pasture was 'carved out' in early medieval times. This wooded character is most prominent in the south-east, near Bethersden; to the north-west, around Egerton Forstal, there are fewer strong hedgerows and woodlands. Throughout the area there are numerous small fields, a fairly high proportion of which appear to be unimproved. Sheep grazing is the dominant land use. Frequent farm ponds are an unusual and very distinctive landscape feature. There are no major settlements, but many small villages and traditional farmsteads, with some extremely fine domestic architecture. Timber framed dwellings from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are very common, and can be seen in villages such as Smarden, which appear almost untouched by the modern world. This is a very intimate landscape, with few outward views, but a wealth of visual interest at a detailed local level.

AREAS OF SEARCH
Figure 3 1:250,000



West of
Maidstone

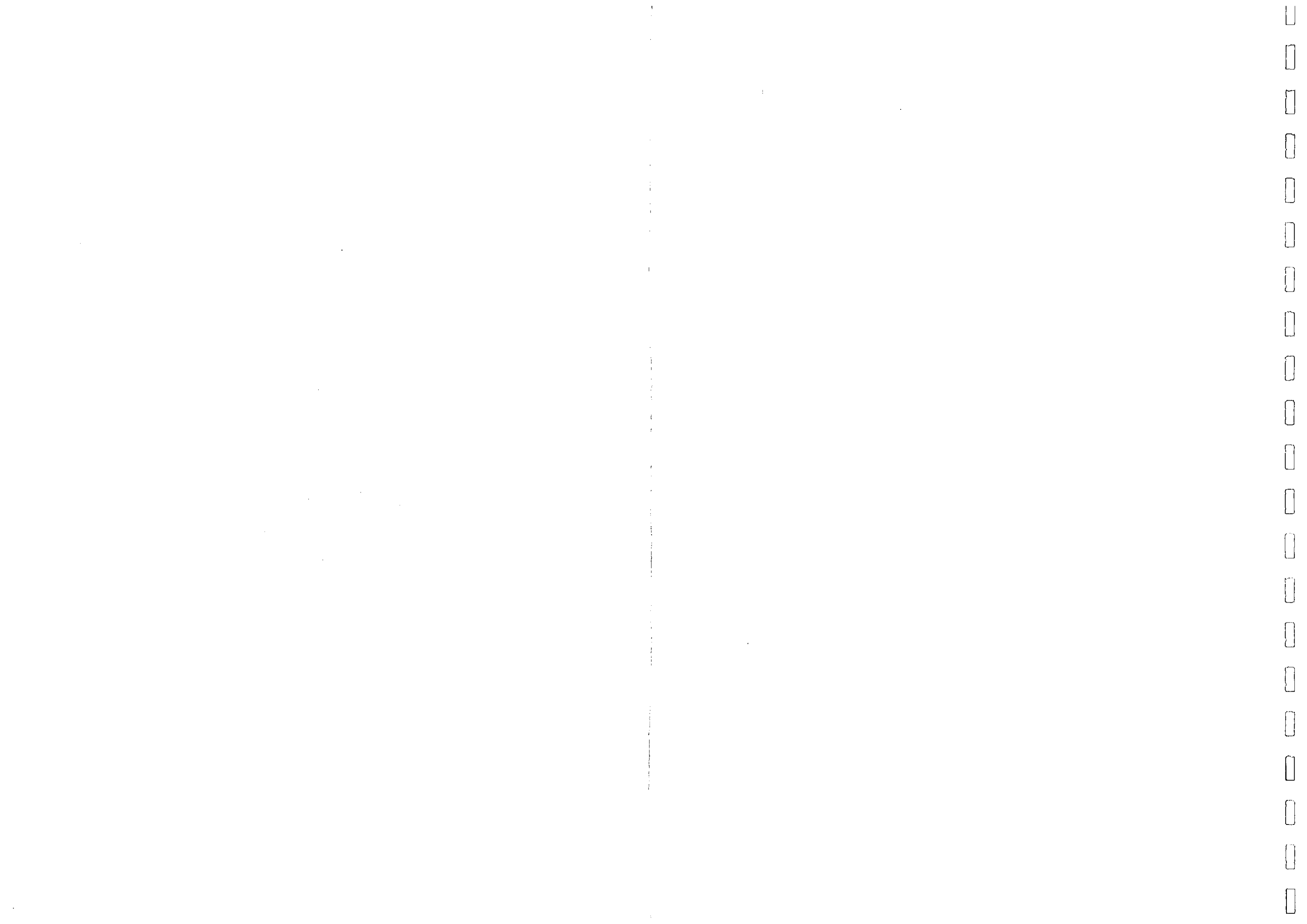
South of
Maidstone

North-West
of Ashford

The Low Weald

Stour Valley

Romney
Marsh



to the south-west of the city cuts through the underlying Oldhaven, Woolwich and Thanet Beds. As might be expected, given the area's former coastal location, there is evidence of much early occupation. The river was probably a major transport route, and Roman roads and ports are known to have occurred in the vicinity. In more recent times, the valley has been affected by coal mining at Hersden, and by widespread sand and gravel extraction. A number of important transport corridors follow the river through Canterbury.

Landscape and Visual Interest

- 5.17 **South-west of Canterbury** the floodplain consists of flat meadows lining both sides of the river, overlooked by the extensive woodland area of the Blean to the north. There are views to Canterbury Cathedral to the north-east. However these attractive features are significantly spoilt by the A28, which runs alongside the river itself, and by the A2, which crosses the river on the southern outskirts of Canterbury. In addition, two railway lines form intrusive linear features in the valley bottom, and there is ribbon development (both housing and industry) alongside the road and rail corridors. Finally, the area is affected by active mineral workings. Hence, overall, its scenic quality must be judged to be fairly poor.
- 5.18 **To the north-east of Canterbury** the Stour Valley is enclosed to the north by a ridge of London Clay. The main Margate road, the A28, follows the crest of this ridge, through the settlements of Sturry, Westbere and Hersden. To the south lies a more isolated rural area, with substantial woodland cover. The river floodplain below includes extensive wetland areas and open water formed as a result both of coal mining subsidence and gravel extraction. In places the visual quality of this area is very high: for example within the intimate landscape of the valley bottom, which includes the attractive settlement of Fordwich, once a port. Unfortunately, though, the landscape is marred in several ways. On the outskirts of Canterbury the valley is adversely affected by development and scruffy urban fringe land uses such as horse pasture. The area near Fordwich is influenced by active sand and gravel workings. From the south side of the valley, there is significant visual intrusion from ribbon development and old colliery spoil heaps along the A28.
- 5.19 **In the lower Stour Valley**, extending from Upstreet north to Reculver and east to Minster and Sandwich, the landscape opens out into a flat and dull agricultural plain. Although something of the former marshland character survives, for example at Ash Level, the area is now dominated by intensive, arable land use. There are very prominent transmission lines, and views eastward to Richborough power station. The area's visual quality generally cannot be said to be high.

Conservation Interest

- 5.20 **The archaeology** of the Stour Valley appears to be of some importance, with clusters of sites from the palaeolithic period onwards occurring along the valley bottom (10). This may be partly due to the extent of mineral extraction within the valley, leading to better than average recording. There is a particular concentration of Roman sites, as the A28 was a Roman road and there were important Roman coastal forts at Reculver and Richborough. Fordwich, too, was an active port and early trading centre. However, the evidence of early habitation is not specially prominent, visually, within the landscape.

- 5.21 There is very significant **nature conservation** interest within the valley. At Stodmarsh the whole valley bottom has been notified as an SSSI for its gravel pits, lagoons and reedbeds, which support an internationally important bird life, and show some similarities to the habitats found in the Norfolk Broads. Preston Marshes, in the Little Stour Valley just to the south, is also an SSSI. Valley marshes of this kind are rare in Kent. In addition, there are important valley-side woodland and carr habitats. Further east, there are SNCIs within Chislet Marshes and Ash Level, where areas of grazing marsh survive.
- 5.22 In terms of **architecture**, the Stour Valley is an area of older settlement than the Weald, and hence shows a wider range of ages and types of building. Fordwich, Sturry and Westbere are Conservation Areas, and the number and quality of medieval buildings appears to be unusually high (14). However, because of the variety of vernacular buildings, they do not help to create any distinct sense of place.

Cultural Associations

- 5.23 Most of the cultural associations with the Stour Valley stem from its proximity to the great city of Canterbury, for which the valley provides the landscape setting. The cathedral has featured in **drawings and paintings** throughout the ages, and the Victorian painter Sidney Cooper painted Dutch style landscapes in the valley last century. Chaucer, Marlowe and other great English **writers** are known to have worked at Canterbury and in the surrounding countryside; and there are links also with the composer Isaac Walton who lived at Fordwich (17). Canterbury City Council would like to see the valley designated as an SLA, but to our knowledge there are no local interest groups who are pressing for designation as such.

ROMNEY MARSH

Formative Influences

- 5.24 The formation of the Romney Marsh landscape is in itself of considerable historical and scientific interest. The development of the marsh has been attributed (18) to four distinct but closely interrelated processes, namely the deposition of the shingle beach through longshore drift; the silt load deposited by the Rother and other rivers; changes in mean sea level; and interference by man with the natural drainage of the marsh. Very briefly, as sea level rose after the last glaciation, a wide bay was formed in south Kent, with low cliffs stretching from Appledore to Lympne. Later, a succession of shingle spits grew across the bay from the south-west, and sedimentation took place behind. In Saxon times, the north-east and west of the present day marsh were still under water, but gradually in the course of succeeding centuries, they were reclaimed for grazing. A channel, known as the Rhee Wall, was cut across the marsh in early medieval times to permit drainage to reach the sea.
- 5.25 Until earlier this century the traditional land use of sheep grazing persisted over most of the area, but the post war period in particular has seen widespread conversion of land to arable use. In addition, other influences such as gravel extraction, the construction of Dungeness power station and associated transmission lines, and the development of coastal holiday resorts, have had major effects on the Romney Marsh landscape.

- 5.8 **South of Ashford** the landscape is again more varied. *On the town's immediate southern outskirts* is a generally flat area, crossed by several main roads. The land is largely in use for grazing, but in parts appears neglected and degraded. This may partly reflect the fact that the area has been identified for substantial new development. However, the intrinsic landscape quality is not specially high.
- 5.9 *To the south-west of Ashford, between Bromley Green and Shadoxhurst*, the landscape is dominated by woodland. There is a very gently undulating landform, defined and divided by prominent woodland blocks and frequent tall dense lengths of hedgerow. Within these wooded enclosures, the farmland is mainly in arable use, and isolated farms form visual foci. In character, this area has more in common with the heavily wooded Old Romney Shoreline SLA to the south, than with other parts of the Low Weald. The landscape is generally unmarred by large scale development, and has a distinctively Kentish woodland sense of place that in some ways resembles that of the Blean.
- 5.10 *To the south-east of Ashford, between Kingsnorth, Mersham and Aldington Frith* is an area of gently undulating land with mixed farming, mature hedgerows and hedgerow trees. This is generally an attractive area, but it does not have a cohesive character. There are views of Ashford to the north, and urban fringe influences upon land use are evident. Although there are some attractive rural buildings and dwellings, their setting is often spoilt by the suburban character of other nearby development.

Conservation Interest

- 5.11 In terms of **archaeology**, the Low Weald is relatively poorly endowed because it was assarted (settled) late. Archaeological studies of the county (10) show a dearth of known sites from almost all periods. The only special concentration of archaeological interest that appears to occur within the area is medieval moated sites, which are relatively common around Collier Street and elsewhere. This concentration is probably due at least in part to the ease of moat construction on clay soils.
- 5.12 Although archaeological interest may be poor, there are many other ancient landscape features within the Low Weald. The area's late clearance to agriculture and poor land quality have helped to ensure the survival of many sites of **nature conservation** interest. North of Bethersden and around Bromley Green are concentrations of ancient woodland (11), including several large Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). Old orchards, for example in the west around Marden, are important both as historic landscape features, and wildlife habitats. Analysis of the Kent Trust for Nature Conservation's survey of Sites of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCIs) (12) also shows that within the Low Weald, certain types of habitat are particularly common, namely old unimproved meadows on acid or neutral soils (these are rare within the county), ponds, streams, species rich road verges, and ancient hedgerows and shaws. Survival rates for these habitats seem specially good in the eastern part of the Low Weald where small fields and old enclosure patterns are still found. Such interest may be more widespread than is currently realised, as no full habitat survey of the county is available at present.
- 5.13 It is clear from consultations and literature review that the **domestic architecture** of the Low Weald is unusually rich. There are numerous Conservation Areas within the Low Weald, particularly its eastern half,

and recent research by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments for England is likely to confirm earlier suggestions that the Low Weald has a nationally rare concentration of medieval timber framed buildings (13, 14). The most distinctive building type is the 'Wealden' hall-house with a recessed front and overhanging ends, as seen for example at Smarden. Throughout the whole of the Low Weald, but especially in the east, the quality and survival rate of such buildings is high, and there is no doubt that they make a very positive contribution to area's visual quality.

Cultural Perceptions

- 5.14 Cultural perceptions of landscape may be important as an indication of the value that is placed on a landscape by society. In general, Kent has been one of the most popular shire counties for English artists. From the mid nineteenth century onwards much of the interest concentrated on small scale pastoral scenes, and the Low Weald, rather than the AONB landscapes of the High Weald or the North Downs, seems to have attracted most attention (15). Work by early artists such as F D Hardy tends to feature the area's villages, trees and lanes and presents a rustic picture of rural life. The work of later, twentieth century artists such as Rowland Hilder and Martin Hardie, reflects Kent's image as the 'Garden of England' by focusing on features such as orchards, farms, oast houses and hop gardens. Numerous writers have also taken inspiration from the landscape of the Low Weald, and have seen it, perhaps, as the archetypal Kent landscape. Probably the best known work is that of H E Bates, who set a series of novels in the eastern Low Weald. These have recently been serialised on television as *The Darling Buds of May*, which was also filmed locally. Vita Sackville-West, who lived at Sissinghurst, just outside the area, also wrote about the Low Weald.
- 5.15 Finally in relation to the Low Weald, it is important to note that there is very strong local consensus as to the importance of the landscape. The Weald of Kent Preservation Society, formed in 1960, has several hundred members, and has lobbied for some time for the area's designation as an SLA on the grounds that it is unique to Kent. The Society's views (16) seem to sum up very aptly the character and quality of the Low Weald landscape:

"We would suggest that the Low Weald's distinctive character lies in the unique domestic nature of its landscape: its patchwork of fields, woods and hedgerows interspersed with its many vernacular farmhouses, oasts and barns, together with the numerous villages, each with historic buildings. Long continuity of rural and agricultural life have given it a cohesive and intimate identity."

THE STOUR VALLEY

Formative Influences

- 5.16 Our second main area of search was the Stour Valley near Canterbury, which lies partly within the Chislet Marshes landscape character area, and partly within the North Kent Agricultural Belt. The most important influence on the formation of this landscape has been the silting up of the Wantsum Channel which in Roman times separated Thanet from the rest of Kent. Accordingly the lower Stour Valley is a flat marshland and arable area, with very rich alluvial soils and extensive riverine gravel deposits. Towards Canterbury, the valley becomes more pronounced, and

Landscape and Visual Interest

- 5.26 The landscape is an extremely flat, open, drained marshland, with a mix of pasture and arable farming. It is dissected by dykes which add detailed visual interest, and punctuated by hedgerows and scrubby willows and poplars in some areas. The roads are generally raised above surrounding land. Churches and small settlements are scattered across the marsh, the church spires forming prominent landmarks. The settlements are often surrounded by clumps of trees for shelter. In the west, around Walland Marsh, is the greatest surviving concentration of small fields, dykes and unimproved pasture, and the sheep themselves, dotted across this landscape, are an important landscape feature. There are some traditional farmsteads and attractive settlements such as New Romney, but wide areas are wholly dominated by the power station, transmission lines and gravel workings. Other detractors include large new agricultural buildings, coastal development, and military uses. The old shoreline cliffs provide visual containment to the north. Over much of the marsh the sea is not visible, despite its very close proximity.
- 5.27 There is no doubt that the marsh has a distinct sense of place. It feels wild and remote, and has strong emotional appeal for many people. However, it is also very clear that its landscape has been greatly damaged in the post-war period. There are very few remaining areas where the scenery can be said to be unspoilt. The best surviving landscapes are probably in the western and northern part of the marsh, below the old cliff line near Appledore. Isolated pockets of fine landscape also survive elsewhere, for example around Fairfield and Old Romney, but these are much too small and fragmented to be suitable for SLA designation.

Conservation Interest

- 5.28 The **geology, geomorphology and archaeology** of Romney Marsh are outstanding, and certainly unique within the British Isles. Of particular interest are the shingle spit at Dungeness Point, which is notified as an SSSI for both its geological and its nature conservation interest; the buried remains of neolithic and bronze age forests; the surviving medieval flood defences; the churches and ruined churches; and the settlements, which hold evidence of many different periods of settlement and past flood events.
- 5.29 In **nature conservation** terms, much of the area is also very important. Reference has already been made to the SSSI at Dungeness Point with its shingle beaches, ridges, salt marsh and internationally important bird life, but there are a number of other large sites of national nature conservation interest, including extensive grazing marshes and dykes within Walland Marsh. Elsewhere, however, it is likely that much of the area's nature conservation interest has been damaged and lost due to agricultural improvement.
- 5.30 With the exception of the Conservation Areas (which include New Romney, Lydd and Dymchurch) and the churches, some of which are very fine, the **built environment** of Romney Marsh is not outstanding in a Kent context, and there is a notable absence of early rural houses. However, the architectural character of the settlements is quite distinctive, with widespread use of weatherboarding and hung tiles. The Royal Military Canal and the Martello towers along the coast are special features of interest.

Cultural Associations

- 5.31 The marsh tends to evoke a strong emotional response in many people, and this is evidenced by the special wealth of paintings and writings that exists. Among the artists who have depicted the coast at Dungeness are Paul Nash and others from the colony of artists at Rye; while many more rustic painters preferred views of sheep and marshlands within the marsh itself. Among the writers who have worked in Romney Marsh or used it as a setting for their novels are H G Wells, Henry James, Joseph Conrad and Rudyard Kipling (19). All drew upon the wilderness character of the marsh for inspiration.
- 5.32 Among the people we spoke to in the course of the study, many expressed surprise that Romney Marsh had not previously been designated as an SLA. There is still enormous public interest in the landscape of the area, but it is focused mainly on the marsh's historical and scientific interest. A local amenity society, the Romney Marsh Research Trust, has as its aim study of the geography, archaeology and history of the marsh. However, among most of those consulted, including the Research Trust, there was also a consensus that the landscape had been more or less irreparably damaged in the post-war period.

OTHER AREAS OF SEARCH

- 5.33 Other areas of search that were explored during the study all fall within a single landscape character area, the Lower Greensand. Accordingly, all three are examined together. For these three generally small areas which might form extensions to the existing Greensand Ridge SLA, conservation interest and cultural associations were not reviewed in depth.

West of Maidstone

- 5.34 West of Maidstone we examined an area extending from the A25 south to Mereworth. The area lies just behind the Greensand Ridge, and adjoins the Kent Downs AONB to the west. It is attractive, rolling ridgeland, with long, dramatic panoramas to the south, west and north. The higher ground is in woodland; while orchards, pasture and arable land clothe the hillsides.
- 5.35 In the west the landscape is generally very well treed, and is dominated by Mereworth Woods, a large ancient woodland. Around the fringes of the woodland are wide areas of sweet chestnut coppice and cob nut growing, which create a distinctive character. Attractive villages, oast houses and other fine vernacular buildings also make a positive contribution to this landscape, which seems to include a particular concentration of Kentish features. Conservation interest includes not only Mereworth Woods, which is in National Trust ownership, but Old Soar Manor and Great Comp Garden. This area is generally unspoilt by development (although on the northern edge there are some distant views to the M20 and M26) and is of very high visual quality.
- 5.36 To the east, beyond the A228, the landscape is much more open and arable, and West Malling airfield, which is to be the site of business park development, dominates the landscape. There is also mineral extraction in the vicinity. The visual quality of this eastern area is more mixed than further west, and there appears to be less conservation interest, with the notable exception of Oaken Wood, an ancient woodland SSSI.

South of Maidstone

- 5.37 This area stretches south from the Medway Valley and the southern outskirts of Maidstone to Yalding, Coxheath and the B2163. Again, it lies behind the Greensand Ridge SLA.
- 5.38 In the west, it represents the south side of the river valley where it has cut through the ridge, and there is a strong valley form. The valley floor is in pasture and arable use, while on higher ground there are large blocks of orchard and deciduous woodland. The topography, farming uses and parts of the built environment such as Teston Bridge and Yalding provide an attractive context, with very good views out from the A26, which closely follows the river. However, views back into the valley are affected by development along the A26. The visual intrusion and fragmentation that this causes has a significant, adverse impact upon the local landscape.
- 5.39 In the east, between Loose and Langley, the landscape is strongly influenced by the proximity of Maidstone. Although much of the land is still in agricultural use, with a mix of arable land, pasture, orchards, shelterbelts and occasional small woodlands, other land uses include suburban housing, factories, schools, playing fields, horse paddock and landfill. There is modern infill within the villages, and sporadic development along the extensive minor road network. Much of this infill is clearly not in keeping with the traditional styles and building materials of the locality. Generally, the landscape quality is poor and inconsistent, and the area does not seem worthy of designation.

North-West of Ashford

- 5.40 This is a small area of the Greensand scarp that seems to have been omitted from the Greensand Ridge SLA originally, possibly because of its relatively high agricultural value, which meant that at one time it fell within a structure plan Area of Special Significance for Agriculture, a designation that has now been dropped. These areas were not supposed to overlap with SLAs.
- 5.41 The area extends from Lenham Heath in the north to Egerton, Pluckley and Little Chart in the south. Although the Greensand scarp is fairly low at this point, the area is very much in character with the rest of the SLA. There is a series of soft ridges and valleys, a strong, consistent hedgerow pattern and several large blocks of woodland and estate parkland. Land use is a mixture of pasture and arable and there are attractive farm buildings, brick or tile hung farmhouses, and villages. Conservation interest includes ancient woodland, for example at Egerton and Little Chart, and several Conservation Areas. Overall this is an unspoilt landscape of high scenic interest, which appears to merit SLA designation.



6 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 6.1 In drawing conclusions and making recommendations for further SLAs within Kent we have considered, first, the general effect that new designations may have in planning terms, and second, the way in which the SLA criteria should be interpreted.
- 6.2 In Chapter 3 we noted that around 50% of Kent is already designated either as AONB or SLA, and pointed to the fact that landscape designations may be devalued if too high a proportion of the county is covered. It is interesting to note that if all the areas of search were to be designated, the proportion of the county covered by landscape designations would increase by 18% to 68%. Whilst it is difficult to give a definitive view as to an acceptable level of designation coverage, this figure would be higher than for any other south-east county and might well tend to devalue the principle of designation and lead to significant increased pressures on non-designated countryside. Therefore, we suggest that any extension to the total designated area should be modest, probably well under 10%.
- 6.3 This figure provides a guideline on the preferred total extent of new SLA, but detailed judgements on the inclusion or exclusion of specific areas have been based on the SLA criteria defined in paragraph 3.4. These have been interpreted in the following way. County importance is considered to be essential. Visual criteria also carry great weight: that is, any potential new SLA must be of high scenic quality, and generally unspoilt by development. Topographic and visual unity and a clear sense of place imply that any new designation must cover a significant area (not just very small pockets of countryside) and have a consistent landscape character. Conservation interests and cultural associations may reinforce the need for designation but should not be the sole justification, because other designations exist specifically to protect sites of archaeological, wildlife and architectural interest.

RECOMMENDED ADDITIONS TO THE SPECIAL LANDSCAPE AREAS

- 6.4 **Figure 4** shows the general extent of recommended additions to the SLAs. In brief, we propose:
- a new SLA designation for the Eastern Low Weald;
 - an extension to the Old Romney Shoreline SLA;
 - two small extensions to the Greensand Ridge SLA.
- 6.5 Together these four additions to the SLAs cover around 5% of the county. Hence the total extent of landscape designations within Kent will increase to around 55%, of which 55% will be AONB/SLA and 22% SLA only.
- 6.6 The remainder of this chapter summarises the reasons why these areas are judged to be of SLA status. In addition, we explain why other areas, including the Stour Valley and Romney Marsh, have been discounted,

and draw attention to those parts of the areas of search that may be of local (but not county) landscape value. Finally, we give some general guidance as to how the district councils should approach the task of defining detailed SLA boundaries.

REASONS FOR INCLUSION OR EXCLUSION OF SPECIFIC AREAS

The Low Weald

- 6.7 At one time, the whole Low Weald was probably of high scenic quality. Unfortunately, though, substantial areas, especially in the west, are now marred by unsympathetic development.
- 6.8 The best area, visually, is the **Eastern Low Weald** between Headcorn and Bethersden, which is an intimate landscape, with a wealth of detailed visual interest. The area is largely unspoilt. It has a very distinctive, wooded character, and many Kentish landscape features such as orchards and oasts. The generally high scenic quality is reinforced by a fascinating landscape history, which has led to a special concentration of wildlife and conservation features. These include neutral grassland, farm ponds, ancient hedgerow habitats, and a nationally rare concentration of medieval timber-framed buildings. There are many important cultural associations with the area, and the principle of designation has strong local support. In short, the Eastern Low Weald meets the SLA criteria very fully, and is clearly a landscape of county importance.
- 6.9 Falling within the Low Weald area of search, there is one other smaller area that appears to merit SLA status due to its high scenic quality. This lies between Bromley Green and Shadoxhurst, south-west of Ashford. It is a well-wooded landscape, with significant nature conservation interest. We propose that it should form an **extension to the Old Romney Shoreline SLA** because it abuts and is similar in character to this area.
- 6.10 The main reason for excluding other parts of the Low Weald from SLA designation is the widespread visual intrusion caused by industrial development, post-war housing, urban fringe land uses, and major trunk roads. These inharmonious influences particularly affect the area between Tonbridge and Staplehurst and the southern outskirts of Ashford. They tend to fragment the landscape, destroying its visual unity. There are no substantial areas of consistently high landscape quality, although many fine Kentish features and small pockets of good landscape do survive. Some of these may be suitable for designation by district councils as **areas of local landscape importance**. We would draw attention, particularly, to the central Low Weald, where the small area between Collier Street and Marden is still dominated by traditional fruit growing and market gardening uses, with a strong pattern of orchards, shelterbelts, hop gardens and oast houses.

The Stour Valley

- 6.11 The Stour Valley is not considered to merit SLA designation. Obviously parts of the valley are of very great archaeological and nature conservation interest; there are also many high quality medieval buildings, and many important cultural associations. However, these considerations are outweighed by visual intrusion which significantly damages the area's scenic interest. South-west of Canterbury the main influences are the numerous transport corridors; while north-east of the city urban fringe

6 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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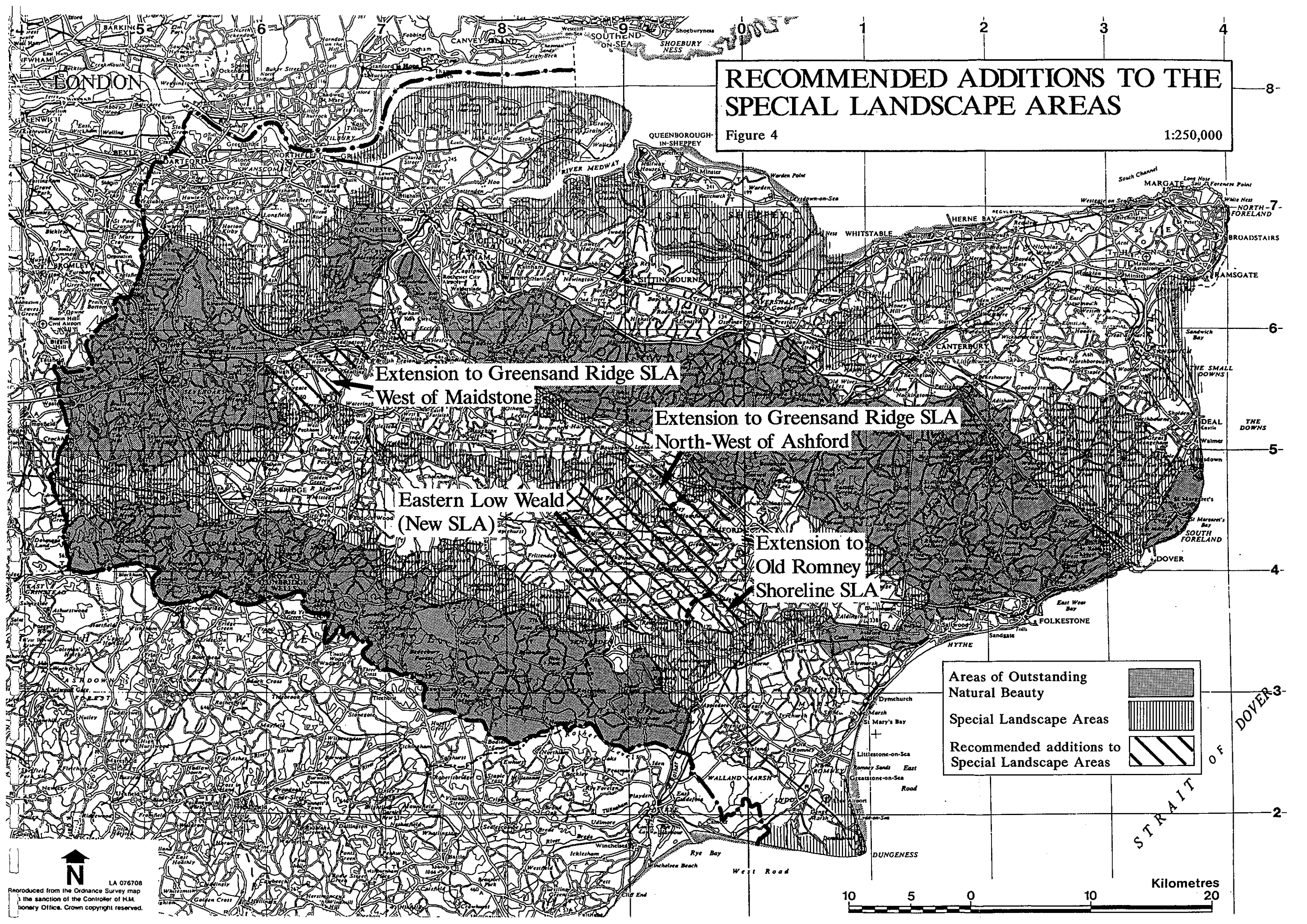
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RECOMMENDED ADDITIONS TO THE SPECIAL LANDSCAPE AREAS

Figure 4

1:250,000



Extension to Greensand Ridge SLA

West of Maidstone

Extension to Greensand Ridge SLA

North-West of Ashford

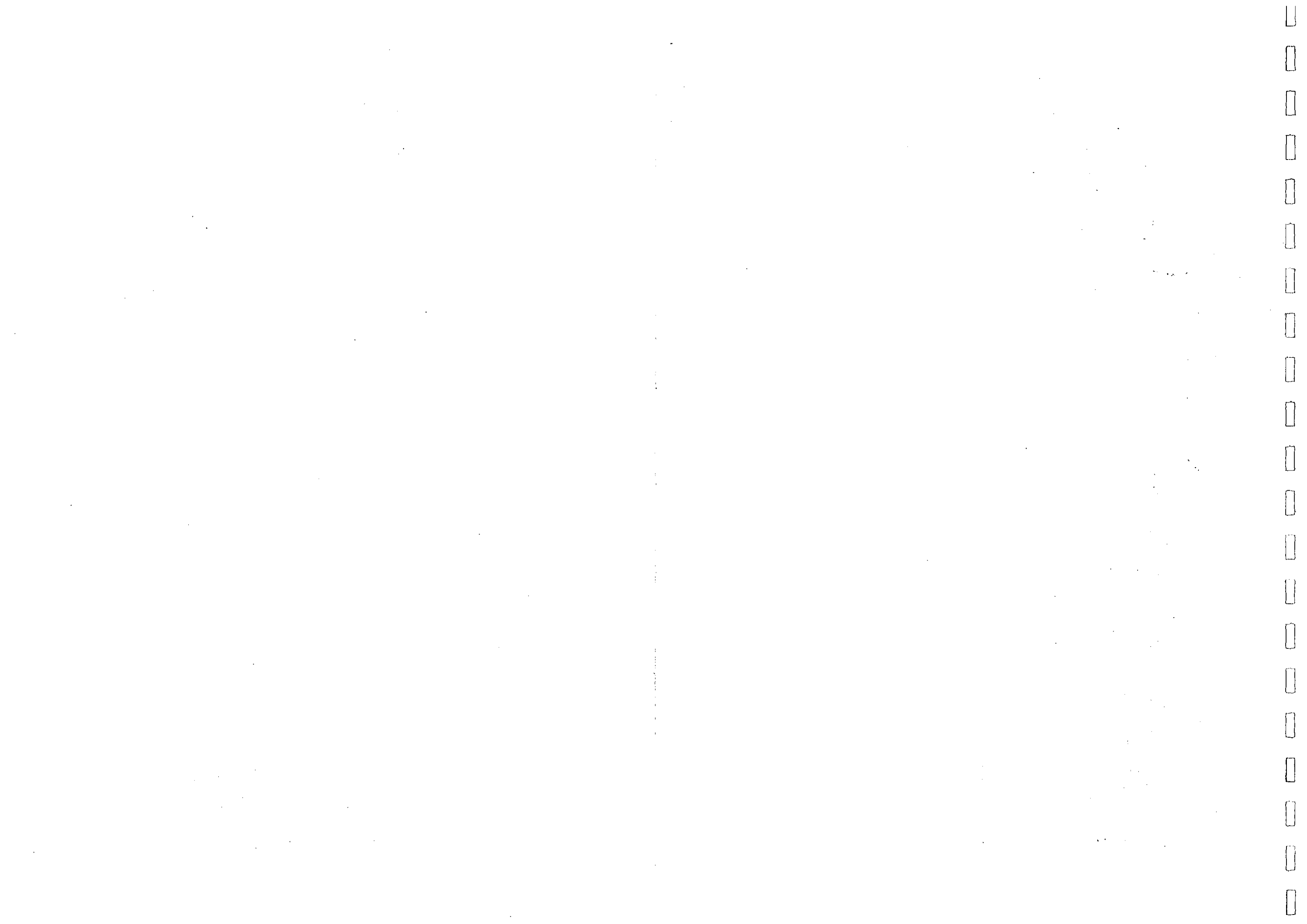
Eastern Low Weald
(New SLA)

Extension to
Old Romney
Shoreline SLA

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty	
Special Landscape Areas	
Recommended additions to Special Landscape Areas	

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degradation, active mineral workings and industrial development have an adverse impact. The former marshland areas of the lower Stour Valley are now largely arable plain. In addition, the valley displays no common character or clear sense of place.

- 6.12 Notwithstanding these factors, parts of the Stour Valley are certainly **areas of local landscape importance**. Consideration should be given to protection of the valley-bottom marshland landscapes around Stodmarsh, Preston Marsh and West Stourmouth. These are certainly valuable in a local context, although not large or special enough to be suitable for SLA designation.

Romney Marsh

- 6.13 Romney Marsh was once the finest coastal grazing marsh in Kent, with a wild, remote character that created a strong emotional appeal for many people. However, open landscapes of this kind are particularly vulnerable to damage by development, the influence of which may extend over wide areas and subtly affect the wild land quality which is the source of the area's landscape interest. Unfortunately, in the post war period, Romney Marsh has been affected in this way by power station development, transmission lines, and gravel extraction. The grazing marshes themselves have also been widely converted to arable use.

- 6.14 Hence, despite the marsh's wealth of historical and scientific interest, and the fact that it has inspired numerous writers and painters, we cannot recommend its designation as an SLA. However, as for the Stour Valley, there are certainly **areas of local landscape importance**. In particular, we would recommend that the district council consider protection of the north-western quarter of the marsh, where the traditional character survives best. For example, in the area around Appledore, unimproved pasture, sheep grazing, drainage dykes, small villages and ancient churches reflect the original appearance of the marsh as a whole.

Other Areas

- 6.15 **West of Maidstone**, the western part of the area of search should form an **extension to the Greensand Ridge SLA** on grounds of its very high visual quality. This area, which adjoins and has much in common with the Kent Downs AONB to the west, is characterised by fine outward views, extensive ancient woodland, many Kentish landscape features, and a wide range of important conservation interests. The eastern part of the area, however, is more open and dominated visually by West Malling airfield. It does not merit designation.
- 6.16 South of Maidstone the landscape is strongly influenced by the close proximity of the town. Although the western part of the area, next the Medway Valley, includes some fine landscape features and small areas of high visual quality, these are too fragmented to form an SLA.
- 6.17 **North-west of Ashford** we again propose an **extension to the Greensand Ridge SLA**. This area appears to have been omitted accidentally when the original designation was made, because its landscape character and quality are wholly consistent with adjacent areas. It is a fine woodland and parkland landscape with attractive villages and farmsteads.

BOUNDARY DEFINITION

- 6.18 The extent of the recommended additions to the SLAs, as shown in Figure 4, is diagrammatic only. Following the designation of the new SLAs in the revised Kent Structure Plan, the definition of detailed boundaries will be the responsibility of the district councils. Boundaries will need to be shown on an Ordnance Survey base, for inclusion in local plans.
- 6.19 It is likely that in future the SLAs will be a significant factor in development planning and development control decisions - some of which may well be contentious. Hence it is important that careful consideration be given to the choice of boundaries.
- 6.20 Ideally, boundaries should be drawn by professional landscape staff: either district council officers, or outside consultants. The SLA criteria and reasons for designation of particular areas, as described in this report, should form the basis for boundary definition.
- 6.21 The boundary definition exercise itself should be undertaken through a combination of desk and field study, preferably at 1:25,000 scale. We suggest that this work might include:
- analysis of land form and land cover, for example containing ridge lines, field patterns, distribution of orchards;
 - preparation of a checklist of landscape elements distinctive to the area, based on the descriptions of landscape character given in this report;
 - simple map-based recording of these features in the field, noting especially any changes in landscape character and quality that occur around the edges of the proposed SLAs;
 - identification of boundaries that follow features such as roads and tracks, which are clearly visible on the ground.
- 6.22 Boundaries should be checked in the field to ensure that they are sensible and logical. In some areas, boundary definition will be fairly straightforward: for example where new SLAs adjoin existing SLAs, or where there are clear topographic changes, for instance along the Greensand ridge. In other areas, such as the western and eastern edges of the Eastern Low Weald, the choice of boundary may be more difficult. The most important factor here is likely to be the degree of visual intrusion by unsympathetic built development.
- 6.23 It is essential that only areas considered to be of county level landscape importance should be included within the SLAs. Judgements as to areas for inclusion or exclusion should always be made on landscape (not planning) grounds. Boundary settlements should be included only where they add to the quality of the countryside.
- 6.24 Once the boundary definition exercise has been completed, its findings should be fully documented for future reference. The record should include:
- a description of the landscape character and special qualities of the SLA;

- details of the method used to determine its boundaries;
- commentary on the boundary, including reasons for proposed inclusions and exclusions;
- supporting photographic material.

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APPENDIX 1
Field Survey Sheet



OBJECTIVE CHECKLIST

Record what is present by marking relevant words:

- inconspicuous x evident xx conspicuous

Landform:

flat	plain	coast
rolling	rolling lowland	estuary
undulating	plateau	broad valley
steep	hills	narrow valley
vertical	cliff	deep gorge
	scarp	

Landcover:

built-up	arable	deciduous woodland	marsh	beach
road	pasture	conifer wood	river	dune
industry	orchards	mixed wood	lake	mudflat
mineral working	hopfields	parkland	reservoir	

Landscape elements:

farm buildings	walls	woodland	river	footpath
churches	fences	coppice woodland	waterfall	track
ruins	hedges	plantation	rapids	road
masts, poles	banks	tree clumps	falls	motorway
pylons	shelterbelt (type)	isolated trees	pond	railway
vernacular buildings (type)	field pattern	hedgerow trees	canal	
		scrub		

SUBJECTIVE CHECKLIST

Record your **immediate** impressions by marking each line with a circle around or nearest to the most appropriate word.

SCALE:	intimate	small	medium	large
ENCLOSURE:	confined	enclosed	open	exposed
VARIETY:	complex	varied	simple	uniform
UNITY:	harmonious	balanced	discordant	chaotic
MOVEMENT:	remote	vacant	peaceful	active
TEXTURE:	smooth	managed	rough	wild
COLOUR:	monochrome	muted	colourful	garish
RARITY:	ordinary	unusual	rare	unique
SECURITY:	comfortable	safe	unsettling	threatening
STIMULUS:	boring	bland	interesting	invigorating
PLEASURE:	offensive	unpleasant	pleasant	beautiful

KENT SPECIAL LANDSCAPE AREAS

Viewpoint No:

Weather:

Location:

Photo Nos:

Date/Time:

Direction of View:

Annotated Sketch.

General description of landscape character including attractors, detractors and seasonal change

Does the landscape display special landscape area visual criteria:

1. Is the landscape of county importance due to its rarity, variety or representativeness.
2. High scenic quality with a distinct sense of place.
3. Unmarred by large scale visually intrusive development.
4. Distinctive and common character - unity
5. Topographic and visual principles - ridgelines.