

E. Farmed and Settled Vale



Extensive views across the well-treed vale to the coast at Porlock Bay.



Sheep graze the undulating, rounded hills of the high vale. The hedgebanks and hedgerow trees form a strong landscape pattern.



Strong influence of Dunkery Hill looming over the vale.



Historic high street at Dunster – the castle forming a gateway to the vale at the eastern end.



Streams and rivers cut across the vale to the coast.

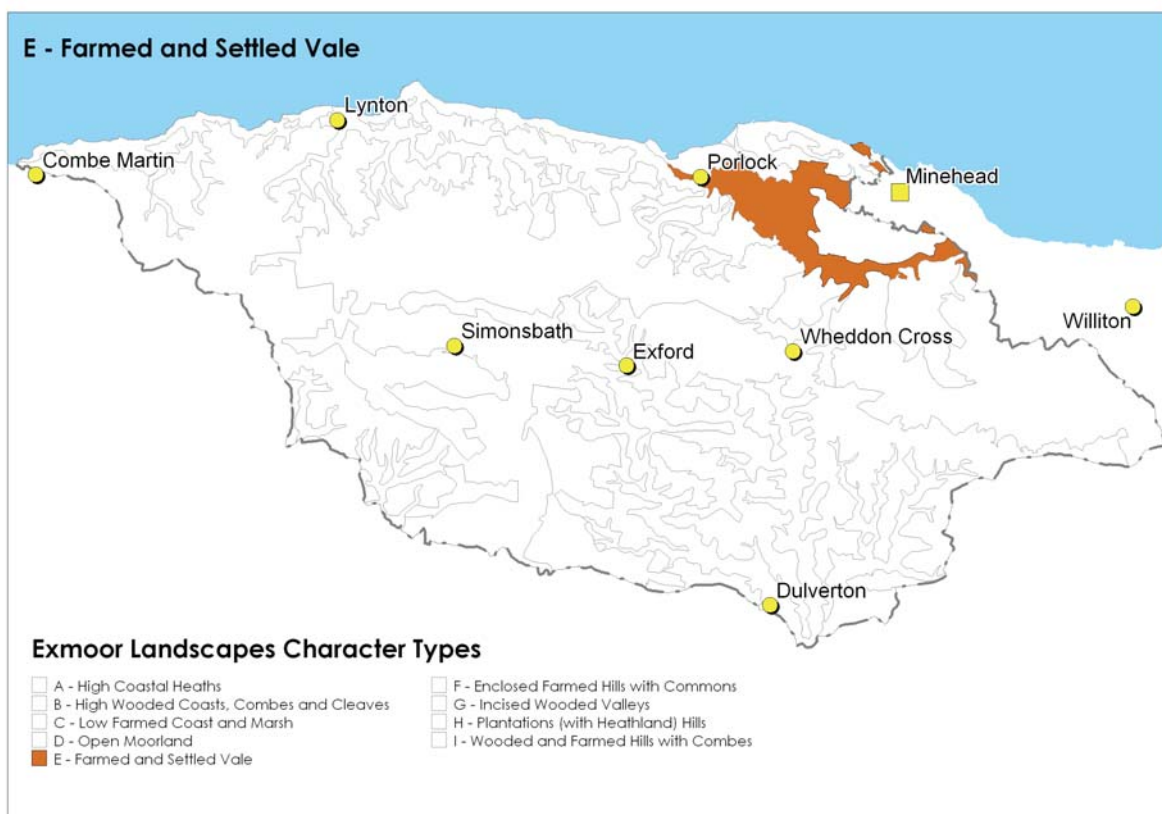


Horsiculture is prevalent on the flood plain. The surrounding wooded slopes offer a strong sense of enclosure.

7. E: Farmed and Settled Vale

Location and Boundaries

7.1 There is just one Character Area (**Porlock-Dunster**) belonging to the *Farmed and Settled Vale* Landscape Type. This area occurs within the northeast of the National Park. It stretches to the southeast from the town of Porlock - branching to the north and south of The *Plantation (with Heathland) Hills*. From the east of Selworthy, the vale extends from Combeshead into Bratton and then on to the coastal town of Minehead (moving beyond the National Park boundary). To the south of the Plantation (with Heathland) Hills, the vale stretches east of Wooten Courtenay, encompassing and terminating at the ancient wool town of Dunster. Here, the vale landscape merges and changes into the distinctly open, flat and low coastal landscape that flanks Blue Anchor Bay.



Key Characteristics

- A medium scale landscape, with a **variable landform (flat floodplain to undulating high vale with occasional small hills or hummocks).**

- The **alluvial flood-plain deposits of streams and rivers** crossing the vale **define much of the surface geology.**
- **Agriculture is a mix of arable and pasture grazed by sheep and cattle.** **Horse grazing and exercising** are particularly evident in the floodplain areas.
- **Fields are bounded by hedge banks (often high)** -predominantly field maple and wych elm - and hedgerow trees (oak, sycamore and ash), **creating a distinct sense of enclosure.**
- **Well-treed character** – in part borrowed from the wooded slopes of surrounding hills but also due to the presence of small copses and clumps, scattered trees and overgrown hedges.
- **Strong visual connection with the surrounding landscapes that enclose the vale** such as the *Open Moorland and Plantation (with heathland) Hills.*
- **Main settlements are Porlock and Dunster** – Dunster Castle being a prominent landmark building.

Landscape Description

- 7.2 The *Porlock – Dunster Farmed and Settled Vale* occurs between 20m AOD and 250m AOD and is a low-lying flat to undulating landscape, carved out by rivers and streams and contained by an interconnected series of surrounding hills. The vale can be broken down into three distinct parts – the vale 'floodplain', the 'low' vale and the 'high' vale. These three areas clearly express the elevation and topographic range of the vale landscape.
- 7.3 The floodplain comprises the flattest and lowest parts of the vale - those areas that immediately flank and extend out from the rivers and main streams crossing through the landscape e.g. River Avill and Horner Water. The floodplain is defined by drift geology of river and stream alluvium deposits (loam with basal gravels). The lowest areas occur around the town of Dunster and between Porlock and Bossington - the western and eastern extents of the Vale - where

the fresh water rivers and streams are nearing the sea and the Vale is making its transition to the adjacent, flatter and lower lying coastal landscapes.



Floodplain pastures.

- 7.4 The contrasting areas of high ground – or high vale – occur at the vale edges; forming the foothills to the distinctly more elevated and pronounced surrounding landscapes of *The Plantation (with heathland) Hills*, the *High Wooded Coast*, *Combes and Cleaves* and the *Open Moorland*.
- 7.5 The high vale is predominantly defined by an underlying geology of reddish brown mudstone with some sandstone (Mercia Mudstone Group) and by a distinct area made up of the Luccombe Breccia Formation⁴ - the latter characterising the surface geology around Luccombe and Huntscott. Here, there is a small series of interconnected rounded hills or knolls forming a distinctive, albeit very localised, landform character. Where the high vale forms the foothills to Selworthy, there is an area of Blue Lias Formation (grey mudstone and shale with fine limestones).

⁴ An ancient gravel mainly made up of small pieces of sandstone and slate.



Local landform variation at Luccombe.

- 7.6 The area of low vale defines the land between the floodplain and the high vale. This is a transitional area that is neither as flat nor as undulating as the land on either side. River terrace deposits (mainly gravel) predominantly underlie the low vale.
- 7.7 The underlying geology of the *Farmed and Settled Vale* gives rise to reddish, loamy, well-drained soils that support a mixed agricultural land use - pasture, dairying, stock rearing, cereals and root crops. Sheep, cattle and horses graze the vale with pasture dominant in both the high vale and floodplain areas - horse grazing being particularly prevalent on the floodplain. The low vale sees the greatest concentration of arable farming where crops are removed from the risk of flooding but the land is suited to mechanised cultivation (unlike the steeper and more undulating ground of the high vale).
- 7.8 Fields are small to medium in size and of an irregular/organic form. This reflects the ancient enclosure of much of the vale. Fields are smaller where the vale narrows – between Wootton Courtenay and Dunster. Where the floodplain is wider and the land flatter, field size increases. The fields are predominantly bounded by hedgebanks (comprising field maple and wych elm) interspersed with hedgerow trees (predominantly oak, ash and sycamore). More recent forms of enclosure are evident on the floodplain where post and rails and post and wire fencing divide the flat landscape into separate areas of grazing. Post and wire fencing is also lining a number of riverbanks.



Small to medium size fields of irregular shape.

- 7.9 There a number of woodland blocks dotted through the vale – the largest concentrated in the area between the settlements of Selworthy, Horner, Allerford and West Luccombe. The areas of woodland combined with the hedgerow trees (and some in-field trees) make for a well-treed landscape character and bring texture, colour variation to the Vale. Although some orchards survive, the loss of many fruit trees (and hedgerow elms) has resulted in a more open landscape character.
- 7.10 The main settlements are the villages of Porlock and Dunster. Dunster, famous for its prominent castle and dramatic wooded setting, once thrived as a wool market and the old Yarn Market remains the high street's landmark feature. Dunster is characterised by a range of traditional buildings mainly dating from the 17th to 19th centuries – including tile-hung facades, thatched cottages and large Georgian houses with slate roofs. Porlock, like Dunster, is a traditional Exmoor village but unlike Dunster has seen the development of modern properties extending out from its historic core. The northwestern edge of Porlock abuts the Low Farmed Coast and Marsh landscape and has open views across Bossington Beach to Porlock Bay.



The Yarn Market at Dunster.

- 7.11 The National Trust's Holnicote Estate (covering 12,500 acres of Exmoor National Park) extends into the Vale with the estates cottages and farms grouped in and around Selworthy, Allerford, Bossington, Horner and Luccombe.
- 7.12 Although having a distinct and recognisable character in its own right, the vale is nonetheless greatly influenced by the character of the surrounding landscapes that emphasise the overall sense of place and provide dramatic context – the looming, simple skyline of Dunkery Hill and Beacon, the dark and dense woodland of Croydon Hill and Horner Wood for example.
- 7.13 Views are varied and interesting within the vale. The vale allows for impressive, long distance internal views and beyond to the Bristol Channel as well as across the aforementioned surrounding landscapes. The presence of, and views to, landmark buildings make a significant contribution to character - buildings such as Dunster Castle, which forms a prominent gateway, and the white lime washed All Saints Church at Selworthy, which stands prominent against its heavily wooded backdrop.

Landscape Evaluation

Strength of Landscape Character

- 7.14 Although when viewed individually elements and features making up the vale may be relatively subtle in character, it is the combination and interplay of

these elements and features that gives this landscape a strong sense of place and a recognisable and **strong** character overall. The flat to undulating landform (with localised hillocks), the strong hedgerow network and repeated field patterning, small woods, the picturesque villages of Porlock and Dunster and the backdrop of the dramatic wooded and moorland hills combine to create a distinct landscape scene. The strength of character of the vale is perhaps best appreciated from beyond its own boundaries - in views offered from adjacent, elevated landscapes such as from the edge of Tivington Plantation or across from Selworthy Church. In places, the decline and inconsistent management of some features, such as hedgerow sections, is threatening to dilute the integrity and intactness of the landscape pattern and, if this continues, will weaken the character and visual integrity of the landscape as a whole.

Landscape Condition

- 7.15 The condition of the Farmed and Settled Vale is varied – ranging from **good** to **moderate**. Visual clues to declining landscape condition appear more prevalent on the floodplain than on the low or high vale areas and are largely related to field boundaries. As noted above hedgerows are declining; appearing thin and gappy in places. In some instances, planting of new hedgerow sections has taken place but more commonly post and wire fencing has been used to stock-proof the gaps – leaving visually permeable breaks. In addition to gappy hedges, the erection of new field boundaries (post and wire and post and rail) is beginning to culminate in cluttering of the floodplain. Previously uninterrupted areas of pasture and meadow flanking watercourses are now often characterised by visually prominent sub-divisions – where areas are sectioned off for horse grazing and exercising. This sub-division of land has led to some areas of overgrazing – the floodplain appearing bare and parched in some places.
- 7.16 This is a managed, working agricultural landscape and with much of the vale forming part of the National Trust's Holnicote Estate, the landscape is largely

well managed -landscape condition overall is judged to be good.



Gappy hedgerows are not uncommon in the vale.

Landscape Strategy

Overall, management of this landscape should endeavour to **conserve** the diversity of landscape features and their combination in order to safeguard the distinctive landscape patterning and visual unity. There is significant opportunity to **enhance** or improve the expression of some landscape features where their condition is in decline – particularly hedgerows. It is essential that the strong interface of the vale with the surrounding hills is conserved and that the vale is protected from the introduction of incongruous features that would threaten the visual character and quality of views enjoyed internally and from surrounding landscapes on higher ground.

*The following table highlights the range of **Issues** recognised through field survey as having (or likely to have in the future) a negative impact on the landscape. The associated **Objectives** are those that would benefit landscape character (and visual amenity) and condition thereby improving overall landscape quality. It is recognised that some of these may be in conflict with other objectives e.g. ecological, agricultural or recreational. The objectives are intended to act as a guide for future consultation work and to inform, for example, the development of actions or implementation strategies.*

*Those issues considered to be long-term landscape threats appear first in the table (under the heading '**Key Issues**' and highlighted in grey). Landscape issues considered, at present, to be less threatening (of secondary significance) appear after the Key Issues under the heading '**Secondary Issues**'. These secondary issues are nonetheless important considerations.*

Landscape Issues	Objectives
Key Issues:	
<p>Interruption of the open floodplain pastures (due to field subdivision) with post and rail fencing, post and wire fencing, and metal staking and taping (typically for horse and pony grazing and exercising leading to a somewhat bitty, fragmented landscape in places).</p>	<p><i>Maintain existing areas of open floodplain and work with landowners to encourage removal/rationalisation of fenced areas on the floodplain.</i></p>
<p>Erection of post and wire fencing along river and stream banks has diluted the natural sense of connection and interrelationship between water bodies, riverbanks and flanking meadows and pastures.</p>	<p><i>Conserve open riverbanks and encourage removal of fencing along watercourses. Particular attention should be given fencing lengths that align public footpaths e.g. where recreational enjoyment of the river is being inhibited.</i></p>
<p>Diluting landscape pattern due to the decline of hedgerows (being thin and gappy in places) particularly on the lowest (floodplain area) of the vale.</p>	<p><i>Promote and encourage active (traditional) management of hedgerow boundaries to strengthen the landscape pattern. Reinstate hedgerow sections that have been lost and consider opportunities for hedgerow tree planting in areas with less tree cover.</i></p>
<p>Potential for energy cropping (miscanthus and short rotation coppice).</p>	<p>Undertake targeted capacity and sensitivity study to understand impact on the landscape.</p>