

## G. Incised Wooded Valleys



Wooded valleys form dark green fingers that push through surrounding landscapes.



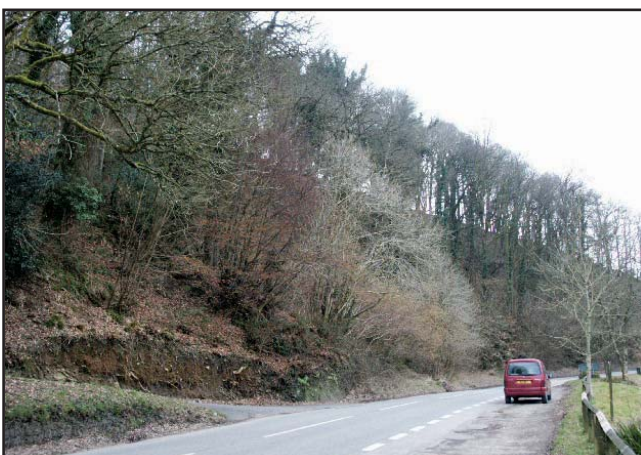
Flat, improved pastures define much of the floodplain landscape – clearly enveloped by steep wooded valley sides.



Rhododendron is a common sight in the river valleys.



Ancient Clapper Bridge crossing at Tarr Steps is an example of numerous archaeological features in the landscape.



Primary and secondary roads follow the course of the rivers on the floodplain.

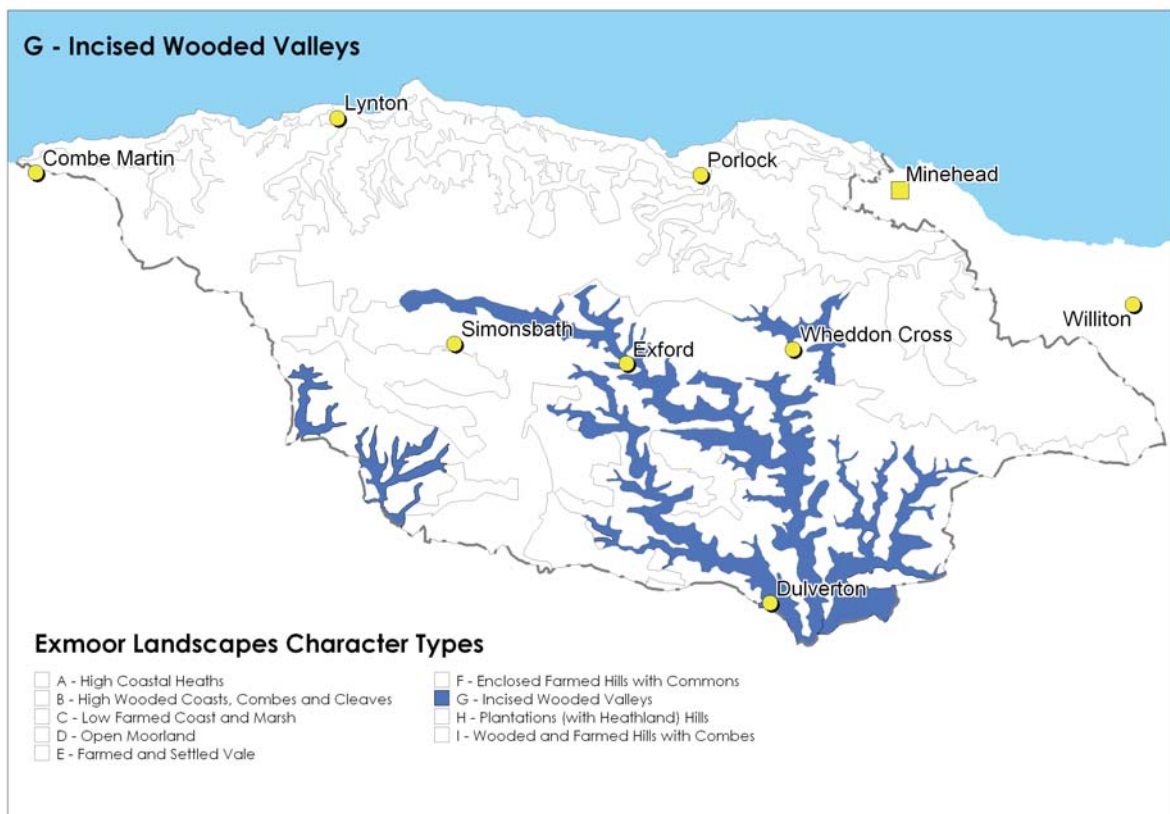


Stone bridges and fords are associated with small-scale settlement clusters.

## 9. G: Incised Wooded Valleys

### Location and Boundaries

- 9.1 There are six character areas belonging to this landscape type and, with the exception of one, they all occur within the southern half of the National Park. Extending into the National Park from its southern boundary, this landscape type encompasses the tributaries and main courses of a number of rivers - Bray, Mole, Barle, Exe, Haddeo and Avill - and intersperses the surrounding areas of *Enclosed Farmland* and *Open Moorland*.



### Key Characteristics

- With a general elevation range of between **150 and 350m AOD**, the **landform of the valleys is dramatic**, with steep-sloping sides and relatively narrow but open valley floors.
- **Underlain by slate, sandstone and siltstone** with drift deposits of alluvium along the course of the rivers.
- **The valley sides are cloaked in woodland** – mixed, deciduous and coniferous. There is considerable **Ancient Woodland** coverage.

- Although there is an **impression of continuous tree cover**, the wooded valley sides are interspersed with **pockets of pasture**.
- **The rivers are often fast flowing with large deposited boulders** forming stepping-stones across the water.
- **The valley bottoms are lush** with riparian vegetation flanking the rivers and ferns typifying woodland and woodland edge flora.
- **The floodplains are distinctly pastoral** with grazing horses and cattle a common sight on the riverbanks.
- **Greatly influenced by a culture of hunting and shooting** – pheasant, partridges and red deer are often seen.
- The woodland cover and enveloping sides of the valleys forges a **dark and enclosing landscape character**.
- **Settlement is small –scale and picturesque**. Villages are typically nucleated and nestled in the shelter of the valley bottoms.
- Villages have a strong relationship with the river – generally **centred around fords and stone-bridge crossing points**.
- **Buildings are of a traditional style** and consistently characterised by **stone, render, slate and thatch**.
- **Secondary and primary** roads typically occur in the valley bottoms, following the course of the rivers.
- **Tranquillity is variable** depending on proximity to the valley roads.
- The enclosing landform and degree of woodland **shelters the landscape from the elements**.

## Landscape TYPE Description

- 9.2 With a general elevation range of between 150m and 350m AOD, this is a highly distinctive landscape characterised by deep, heavily wooded valleys - distinctive dark green fingers that push through the surrounding areas of farmland and moorland.
- 9.3 Woodland defines much of the land cover – predominantly deciduous woodland interspersed with mixed and coniferous areas. There is a considerable amount of Ancient Woodland coverage. Combined with the woodland, the deeply incising valley landform creates a marked sense of enclosure and a shaded, dark landscape character. The woodland cover offers significant opportunities for rearing and shooting game birds. Game

feeding bins and release pens are not an uncommon sight and provide visual references to this increasingly popular sport.

- 9.4 Although there is an impression of continuous woodland cover, there are significant areas of farmland – both on the river floodplain and sloping valley sides. The farmland is defined by small-scale irregular field units given over for pasture. Characteristic field gutter systems are seen on the valley sides. Sheep, cattle and horses graze in the valley with the latter two more common on the floodplain pastures.
- 9.5 The valley floodplains offer a change in landscape scene from the wooded valley sides – the flat, open and smooth pastures leading to riparian trees aligning and identifying the course of the water. The rivers are often fast flowing and littered with large boulders that form stepping-stones across the water. Stone bridges and fords allow road crossings over the rivers and are typically associated with clusters of settlement.
- 9.6 Settlement is characterised by villages and hamlets close to the main river, with farms and some individual properties dispersed throughout the valley sides – often along the spring lines of streams running towards the river. Secondary and primary roads occur at the valley bottoms – following the course of the water.
- 9.7 The degree of tranquillity in the landscape is greatly influenced by the amount of traffic, at any given time, using the valley roads.

## **G1. Bray**

- 9.8 The smallest of the Incised Wooded Valleys, this valley forms part of the much bigger valley system of the River Bray that occurs just outside the National Park boundary. The landscape is heavily wooded with significant tracts of deciduous woodland (e.g. East Down Wood) and coniferous woodland (e.g. Sherracombe Wood). There are areas of small-scale farmland but these are secondary to the wooded character of the landscape. With the exception of

two rural roads (Muxworthy Lane and Whitefield Lane) there are no other transport routes through the landscape. The recreational route of the Macmillan Way West crosses the valley between Whitefield and Holewater. The landscape is unsettled with the exception of farms at Whitefield and Muxworthy both on the boundary of the area at the edge of valley.

## **G2. Mole**

- 9.9 Centred on the River Mole, this is another small character area belonging to the *Incised Wooded Valleys*. Unlike the tributary valley of the River Bray (G1), this area has a greater mix of woodland and farmland. The woodland is predominantly defined by coniferous plantations - at Buttery Wood and Long Wood. The latter stretches along the entire southern valley side from Shortacombe to Heasley Mill. The farmland is characterised by small, irregular field units given over to pasture. Some of the upper reaches of the combes have a scrubby character such as Span Bottom and Lydicombe Bottom.



Heasley Mill

- 9.10 The tiny village of Heasley Mill occurs just inside the National Park boundary and consists of a number of stone and white rendered properties with slate roofs. Surrounding Heasley Mill are a number of disused mines and shafts – relics of the copper and iron mining industry of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## **G3. Barle**

- 9.11 One of the largest character areas of this landscape type, the *River Barle Incised Wooded Valley* stretches from Pixton Park (south of Dulverton), to

Landacre Bridge and the upper reaches of Pennycombe water – both northwest of the village of Withypool.



The River Barle

9.12 The River Barle has a natural character having seen very little intervention from pollution, water abstraction or engineering. Its nature conservation value is wide-ranging and includes including important aquatic and floodplain flora, invertebrates, fish (salmon spawning ground), birds (nesting and feeding habitat for Kingfishers) and mammals (otters being recorded). This is recognised by its national (SSSI) designation.

9.13 The woodland is relatively continuous north of Dulverton but becomes less dense further upstream – broken by farmland. This is especially true of the small combs around the tributary streams that feed into the main watercourse. Small-scale, irregular fields (typically grazed by sheep) define the farmland. The bulk of the woodland comprises deciduous, native species (much Ancient Woodland) but there are some areas of coniferous woodland e.g. Shircombe Slade and New Invention Wood.

9.14 This valley has many visible historic and archaeological landscape features including the Iron Age enclosures of Mounsey Castle and Brewer's Castle and the old river crossings at Landacre and Tarr Steps. Landacre Bridge and Tarr Steps are much-visited beauty spots but the Barle Valley as a whole is popular with visitors - being well served by public rights of way, including the Two Moors Way.

- 9.15 The Barle Valley has limited vehicular access. Aside from the collection of secondary roads at Dulverton, there are only a few places where roads cross the valley. There is no continuous stretch of road that follows the course of the river, as is found in other areas of this landscape type e.g. River Exe.
- 9.16 The town of Dulverton sits at the southern end of the valley. Often referred to as the southern gateway to Exmoor, Dulverton sits adjacent to the Barle Floodplain and is characterised by small-scale shops, pubs and tearooms at its centre with numerous traditional stone and rendered properties (predominantly Victorian) aligning the roads leaving the town - the B3222 and B3223. Towards the outskirts of the town, post-war housing defines much of the approach to Dulverton along the B3222. To the south of Dulverton lies Pixton park – a substantial Georgian country residence surrounded by wooded parkland.
- 9.17 With its picturesque six arch stone bridge crossing the Barle, Withypool is the other settled area within the valley. Located at the foot of the *Open Moorland* of Withypool Common, the village of Withypool consists of traditional and post-war housing strewn along the roadside. Settlement is characterised by scattered farms located on the upper valley sides often in the combes of tributary streams.

#### **G4. Exe**

- 9.18 The River Exe is the largest of the *Incised Wooded Valleys*. It starts as spring fed streams and waters running off the adjacent *Open Moorland* and continues in a south-westerly direction winding its way through the villages of Exford and Winsford, converging with the River Quarme and continuing south, through Exton and Bridgetown before meeting the River Barle, southeast of Dulverton.
- 9.19 As with the River Barle, the Exe is more wooded to the south where there are larger and more continuous tracts of tree cover. Towards the north of the valley, closer to the higher ground of *the Open Moorland*, there is a greater

proportion of land given over to farming - pasture, contained within small hedge-banked fields. The woodland is predominantly deciduous with some areas of coniferous plantation.

9.20 The busy A396 follows the course of the River Exe as far as Exton and then the River Quarme. The road route through the valley offers a number of viewing opportunities – through the hanging woodland on the valley sides, across the open floodplain and down into the fast-flowing river for example. The road is separated from the adjacent floodplain pastures by both stonewalls and metal railings fed through concrete posts. A number of secondary roads feed off the A396 and rise at acute angles up the steep valley sides.

9.21 There are four small-scale settlements within the Exe valley, all of which take their name from the river or aspects of the river – Exford, Winsford, Exton and Bridgetown. The villages of Exford and Winsford are the largest. Exford is traditionally associated with a culture of hunting, shooting and fishing. Its houses, shops and hotels are centred on a large village green. Winsford is where the Winn Brook meets the River Exe and is a popular location for tourists and day visitors with its tea room, pub and picture-postcard scenery. Stone (exposed, painted and rendered) and slate are the most common building materials.



Dropping down to Exford on the B3224.

## **G5. Haddeo**

- 9.22 The *River Haddeo Incised Wooded Valley* is unique in that it is the only valley containing a large open water body – Wimbleball Lake. The valley consists of three tributary valleys extending down from the surrounding Enclosed Farmland to merge with the River Haddeo in the south. The tributary valleys include the River Pulham, which passes the village of Brompton Regis and continues to Hartford where it joins the Haddeo.



Wimbleball Lake.

- 9.23 The Haddeo valley extends as far south as the National Park's boundary (southeast of Dulverton). It is just beyond this boundary that the river meets with the River Exe (north of Exebridge). Much of the valley surrounding the River Haddeo is heavily wooded (Haddon Wood and Storridge Wood) but this dramatically opens up to the east of Hartford where the river has been dammed to form Wimbleball Lake reservoir. Wimbleball Lake is a much-used resource for sailing, fishing, camping, bird watching and walking. From Haddon Hill *Open Moorland* to the south, clear views can be gained of Wimbleball Lake and the wider Haddeo valley system.
- 9.24 Woodland cover reduces significantly towards the upper reaches of the valley but those areas that are wooded combine with the valley landform to create a clear distinction from the adjacent *Enclosed Farmland*.

9.25 Settlement within the landscape is limited to the village of Brompton Regis and the hamlets of Bury, Venn, Upton and Withiel Florey. There are a number of farms occurring at the edge of the valley.

## **G6. Avill**

9.26 The River Avill is the only one of this landscape type to run from the south towards the north of the National Park. It is located north of the River Exe – separated from this other river system by the *Enclosed Farmed Hills* in the Wheddon Cross area. This character area is small with two watercourses and valley systems merging before continuing as one towards the *Porlock – Dunster – Minehead Farmed and Settled Vale*.

9.27 The valley in the west starts at Dunkery Gate (immediately adjacent to the *Open Moorland* of Dunkery Hill). The southern side of the valley is largely covered with deciduous woodland and the A396 cuts along the valley side at Cutcombe Hill. The greatest proportion of land on the northern valley side is however given over to farming – predominantly pasture. The main watercourse is fed by a number of streams with their own small combe valleys that are typically the location of individual farms.

9.28 The valley running from the south is predominantly defined by tree cover in the form of coniferous plantations e.g. Hartcleeve and Highley Plantations at the edge of Lype Hill and Common. The watercourse of this valley extends northwards where it meets with the River Avill (and the western valley) at Steart. From Steart the floodplain widens, the western valley side is open and farmed whilst to the east it is characterised by deciduous woodland. Both the A396 and a minor road (Drapers Way) follow the course of the River Avill before the valley widens to merge with the markedly more open and less wooded landscape of the *Farmed and Settled Vale*.

## Landscape TYPE Evaluation

### Strength of Landscape Character

- 9.29 Strength of Landscape Character is deemed to be **high** overall. These river valleys offer dramatic landforms, picturesque floodplains, dense woodland and fast-flowing scenic rivers that combine to evoke a very definite sense of place and strong contrast in character to surrounding areas of farmland and moor.

### Landscape Condition

- 9.30 There some elements of the landscape judged to be in moderate condition but overall, condition is judged to be good. There are some negative conditional elements (shown in the table below) but overall there is an impression of a landscape with many features and elements in-tact and well managed.

### Landscape Strategy

The overall landscape strategy should be to **conserve** landscape character – the intimate, wooded, sheltered valleys and natural river systems. There are some opportunities for landscape **enhancement** e.g. rhododendron removal, prevention of road urbanisation, removal of fencing along riverbanks and repair of post and rail fencing along roads. Such implemented change would simplify the landscape, improve the overall state of repair/intactness thereby improving landscape quality.

*The following table highlights the **Key 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	Priority Areas
<b>Key Issues:</b>		
Loss of natural/semi-natural character of woodland (as well as views into and through woodland areas) due to rhododendron encroachment.	<i>Manage levels of encroachment to prevent mono-species coverage of the ground flora and under storey.</i>	G3. River Barle G4. River Exe
Erection of post and wire fencing along river and stream banks has diluted the natural sense of connection and interrelationship between rivers, riverbanks and flanking meadows and pastures.	<i>Conserve open riverbanks and encourage removal of fencing along watercourses. Particular attention should be given to lengths of fencing that align public footpaths e.g. where recreational enjoyment of the river is being inhibited.</i>	G4. River Exe
Urbanisation of main road corridors through the valleys due to highway signage, kerbing and road markings.	<i>Work closely with the Highways Authority to seek more visually sympathetic/subtle road safety solutions.</i>	G4. River Exe
<b>Secondary Issues:</b>		
Cumulative impact of infrastructure associated with game shoots – pens and feeders are frequently seen, are often conspicuous (brightly coloured feeders) and detract from overall visual amenity.	<i>Minimise the impact of game shooting in the landscape to ensure a less interrupted, smoother landscape scene. Encourage landowners to position feeders and pens in less visually sensitive areas.</i>	G3. River Barle G4. River Exe G5. River Haddeo

## Landscape Character AREA Evaluation

### **G1. Bray and G2. Mole**

- 9.31 A key issue affecting both the valleys of the Bray and Mole are areas scrubbing up close to the springs in the upper combes. This is creating an almost moorland fringe character in places. Some areas of floodplain pasture, appear under grazed.

### **G3. Barle**

- 9.32 Perhaps the area of greatest concern within the River Barle is the landscape surrounding Tarr Steps. Here, due to the popularity of the area with visitors, a car park, toilet block, and new footpath (with signage) has been added to the landscape. Such additions act to formalise or 'tame' the valley by increasing the human footprint or presence in the landscape. With such change comes the threat of creating a 'visitor attraction' character that can undermine the simplicity and natural qualities of the landscape scene.



New visitor facilities at Tarr Steps

### **G4. Exe**

- 9.33 The A396 has a strong influence on this landscape and it is important to monitor the changes to, and additions of, signage and road markings along this route. This will be important to ensure the influence or dominance of the road is not heightened, such that it detracts from the rural character of the valley.



It is important to prevent urbanisation of the A396

- 9.34 Visual cluttering in this river valley is also important. The erection of numerous fences along the Exe riverbank has interrupted the seamless visual connection between river and adjacent meadow pasture. In addition, game bird rearing and release pens could accumulate to a level where they become visually obtrusive. It is these small-scale, incremental changes in the valley that can reduce the visual amenity and landscape quality and detract from the enjoyment of visitors and users.

## **G5. Haddeo**

- 9.35 Recreational pressure, due to the presence of Wimbleball Lake, is perhaps the main force for change within this landscape character area. It is important to ensure that the amenities required to facilitate public enjoyment do not detract from the visual amenity or scenic quality of the area. This is particularly important due to the proximity of visibility from the popular *Open Moorland* area of Haddon Hill. As the valley landform at Wimbleball Lake is very subtle and unwooded, it is more exposed, visually, than other character areas.

## **G6. Avill**

- 9.36 As there are two roads running alongside the river within this relatively small character area, there is a need to ensure that, as with the Exe Valley, the roads do not further encroach on the landscape as a result of highway improvement or change.