

H. Plantations (with heathland) Hills



Interconnected hills (balls) and ridges covered by dense, coniferous plantations and some mixed woodland.



Far reaching views from Bat's Castle across the Farmed and Settled Vale to the Open Moorland at Dunkery.



Surviving pockets, and some newly restored, heathland form clearings in the woodland and offer greater nature conservation value.



Views to Dunster and beyond to the low coastal landscapes at Minehead and Blue Anchor.



Coniferous trees often breach skylines and restrict views and sense of connection with the wider areas of heather moorland.

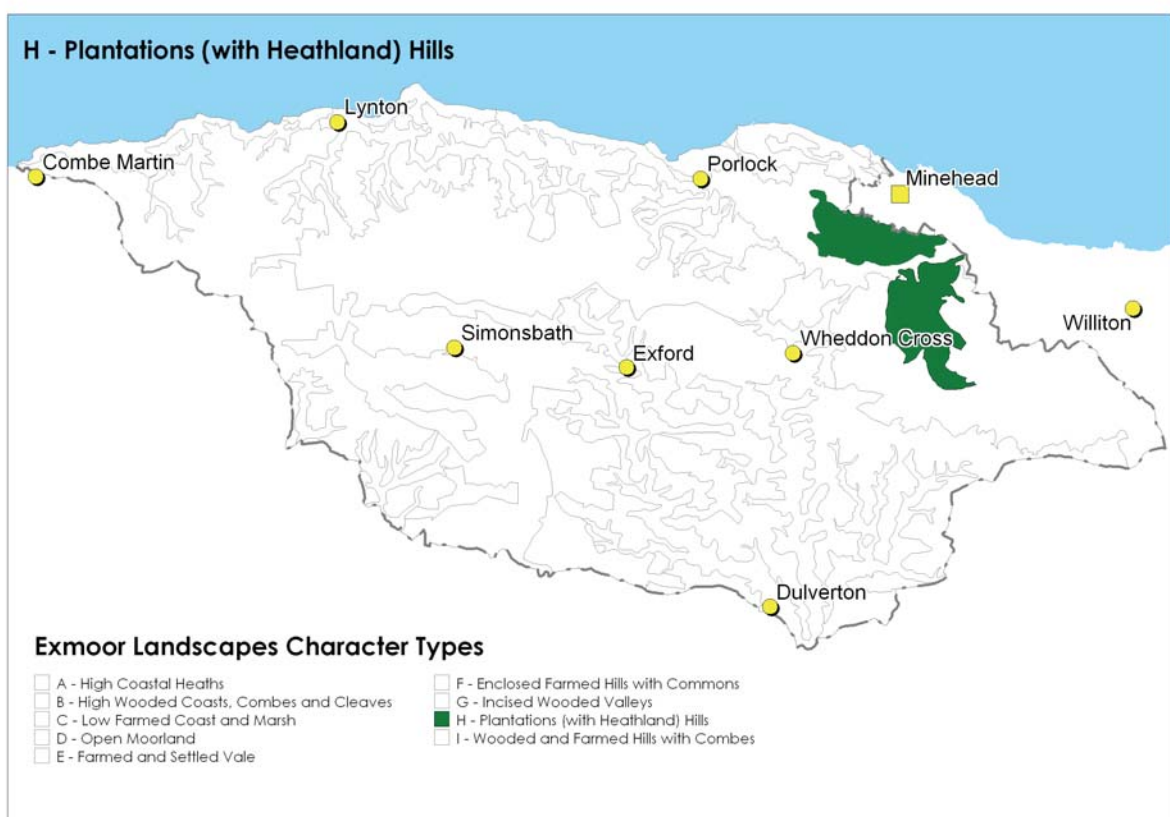


Stone walls and a ha-ha are visual references to the historic Deer Park.

10. H: Plantation (with Heathland) Hills

Location and Boundaries

- 10.1 There is just one Character Area (*Croydon Hill – Wootton Ridge*) belonging to the Plantation (with Heathland) Hills Landscape Type. This area occurs close to the eastern/north-eastern boundary of the National Park, stretching east to west immediately south of the coastal town of Minehead across to Dunster. At Dunster, the hills are broken by the vale landscape surrounding the River Avill and at this point they extend south before terminating near to the village of Luxborough in the Brendon Hills.



Key Characteristics of the Landscape Type

- **Series of interconnected hills (balls) and ridges at an elevation of 150m – 380m AOD** – moderate to high altitude within Exmoor.
- **Predominantly underlain by Hangman Stone Formation** - fine to medium-grained sandstone and reddish-brown mudstone.

- **Covered by dense, managed coniferous plantations and some mixed woodland.**
- **Some surviving pockets of heathland** (although under pressure from encroachment) and some areas of newly restored heathland.
- **Highly restricted views generally, due to density of tree cover**, although surviving open areas offer inland and coastal views.
- **Tranquil landscape character** – remote in places although human influence evident due to way-marked recreational routes and timber management tracks.

Landscape Character Description

- 10.2 With an elevation range of between 150m- 380 m AOD, the *Plantation (with Heathland) Hills* landscape of Croydon Hill – Wootton Ridge sits at moderate – high altitude within the context of Exmoor. This is a visually striking landscape of dramatic convex hills that sits proud and pronounced from the adjacent landscape of the *Farmed and Settled Vale*.
- 10.3 Formerly an area of heather moor, the hills (balls) and ridges (cut by a number of combs) are now cloaked by an interconnected series of managed coniferous plantations (and some mixed woodland), making for a conspicuous landscape – the dense, dark green forest forming a strong contrast with surrounding areas in terms of colour, texture and landscape pattern. The conifers are eye-catching but incongruous when viewed as part of the more typical Exmoor landscape scene of gently rolling hills, open tops and winding broadleaved river valleys. There are some important areas of broadleaved woodland – Withycombe Scruffets to Hats Wood, Halse Wood and Whits Wood for example - thought to be ancient semi-natural woodland.
- 10.4 Some areas of heathland survive, such as at Black Hill and there is an ongoing heathland restoration project at Wootton Ridge. Heather can also often be seen aligning the verges of the few roads that cut through the trees as well as

at plantation edges. There are visual clues in the landscape as to its former character – heathy commons bounded by stone faced banks – and these can be found within the plantations.

- 10.5 Due to the felling of coniferous trees, Wootton Ridge has become significantly more open in character, and this has allowed for wider views; the majority of the plantation hills having highly restricted views due to the density of the tree cover. Both Black Hill and Wootton Ridge offer views across to Dunkery Hill and Beacon. These views make it easy to imagine the *Plantation Hills* covered by heather moor and forming part of a much larger northern moorland block within the park. As well as views to Dunkery, the open tracts provide other viewing experiences – along the vale to Dunster, across to Minehead and the Bristol Channel.
- 10.6 Although areas of heather moor still exist on the hills, there is a strong sense of a battle to compete with the plantations, with the added threat of bracken, gorse and self-seeding deciduous trees, which are all acting to further enclose the few surviving open areas that break up the uniformity of the plantations.
- 10.7 As noted there are only a few vehicular roads through the forest. The lack of vehicles, and their movement in the landscape, makes for a very tranquil character. Some parts of the landscape feel remote although this is reduced by presence of way-marked footpaths and bridleways, picnic sites, interpretation boards, and access tracks that cut through the plantations to allow for forestry management. These elements afford a sense of human activity and influence in the hills. It is along these rides and tracks that the vastness of the plantation can be fully appreciated.
- 10.8 On the lower slopes, there are some areas of agricultural land – predominantly pasture although other land uses are evident, such as free-range chicken farming, where portable sheds are visually prominent. Where tributaries of the River Avill cut through the hills, there are small surviving pockets of pasture (and

seasonally wet meadow) although these would appear to be under grazed in places.

- 10.9 There are a number of archaeological sites e.g. Bat's Castle and Gallox Hill. Dunster Deer Park provides clues to historic land uses as do the numerous stone banks, indicating old-field boundaries.
- 10.10 Dunster Castle and Periton Park evoke parkland and former estate character in places.

Landscape Evaluation

Strength of Landscape Character

- 10.11 Strength of Landscape Character is deemed to be moderate – strong. The prominence of the hills and ridges and the extent and uniformity of the plantations make for a landscape of very distinctive character, with a strong sense of place. The strength of character is however reduced to some degree by the sense of transition or state of flux in the landscape. This is emphasised by the loss of heathland where scrubbing up and bracken encroachment is occurring and where there are attempts at heathland restoration. As well as affecting the condition of the landscape (see below), this change makes for uncertainty in terms of present and future character – is it to be a wooded landscape or a heathland landscape or will there be significant tracts of both?

Landscape Condition

- 10.12 The condition of the *Plantation (with Heathland) Hills* is judged to be moderate/declining. This is mainly due to the sense of heathland loss or reduction where scrubbing up, presence of young trees and the encroachment of bracken are occurring. Recently felled areas of coniferous plantation (for heathland restoration) evoke a poorly managed landscape but this is likely to be a temporary impact providing restoration management techniques are successful. There are a number of surviving historic features – such as the stone walls of the ha ha of the Dunster Deer Park, which would appear to be falling

into decline.

Landscape Strategy

There are three strategies that should be aimed at the Plantation (with Heathland) Hills landscape – **restoration, enhancement and conservation**. Providing appropriate, successful management techniques can be employed, further restoration and enhancement of heathland areas will create greater landscape diversity and offer more of a balanced mix of both wooded and non wooded areas – a true heathland-woodland mosaic. This will, in turn, bring greater visual amenity in the form of wider views and, with that, appreciation of connectivity to surrounding inland and coastal landscapes. Importantly, a greater sense of connection with nearby moorland area (at Dunkery) will be realised – enhancing the presence of moorland on Exmoor. Conservation of a number of landscape features is also important – existing view lines such as that from Black Hill to Dunster and on to the coast is an example as is the sense of calm and tranquillity due to the lack of vehicular and other noise intrusions. Every effort should be made to conserve and enhance surviving historic features and where these have eroded, opportunities for restoration should be explored e.g. medieval deer hunting park landscape which provides important references to previous land uses (ha-ha) as well as historic and cultural depth

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
Key Issues:	
Loss of texture and colour of heath land areas due to encroachment of bracken	Continue with existing heath land restoration schemes to reinstate and extend

and gorse, coniferous and deciduous woodland species.	<i>areas of heath land cover – working, with forestry interests, towards a woodland-heath land mosaic for greater visual diversity.</i>
Loss of views and reduced quality and extent of surviving views from heath land areas due to intervening encroaching vegetation such as gorse and coniferous trees that protrude above ridgelines.	<i>Restore open views from heath land areas through selected felling of conifers breaching ridgelines (blocking views) and removal of gorse. This will improve visibility across the heath land and improve visual connection with other heath land areas e.g. views across to Dunkery.</i>
Threats to the setting of archaeological features in the landscape due to woodland and scrub encroachment.	<i>Manage bracken and gorse encroachment and employ selective tree felling to restore/create open settings to important archaeological features and sites.</i>
Secondary Issues:	
Lack of management (lack of grazing) of surviving pockets of pasture aligning tributary streams – probably as a result of poor access.	<i>Encourage traditional grazing of the floodplain area - conserving and enhancing flanking meadows and pastures.</i>
Poor visual amenity in areas of ongoing heath land restoration due to burning and cutting (scorched stumps and damaged ground).	<i>Where possible and appropriate, identify future heath land restoration sites where there would be least adverse visual impact.</i>
Diluted expression of historic landscape features e.g. decline of surviving stone faced banks within the plantations.	<i>Reinforce the historic landscape grain through a process of restoration and enhancement.</i>

