

Countryside Character
Volume 7:
South East & London

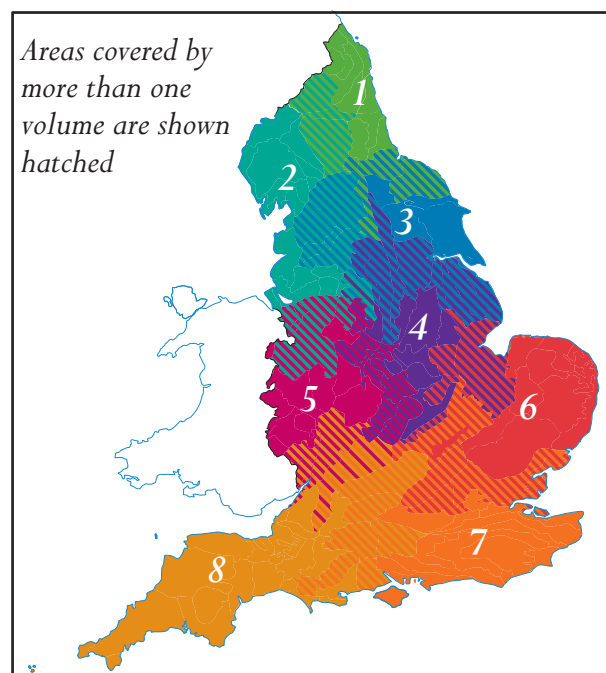
*The character of
England's natural and
man-made landscape*

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Acknowledgements

The Countryside Agency acknowledges the contribution to this publication of a great many individuals, partners and organisations without which it would not have been possible. We also wish to thank Chris Blandford Associates, the lead consultants on this project.

View of the wooded Weald from the Surrey Hills. The South Downs can be seen on the horizon, across the extensive patchwork landscape of woods, hedgerows, sunken lanes and enclosed fields.



Foreword

As soon as I saw the Character Map of England I realised that it should have been one of the front pages of my school atlas. Not only does it reflect influences such as geology and landform, but it also records the effect of thousands of years of human activity within an ever-evolving natural world. Thus it, and the supporting descriptive documents, are not merely a celebration of the diversity of our country but they are also an important educational and planning tool – for today and tomorrow.

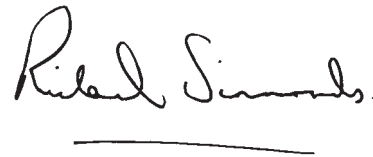
For unless we recognise and understand the special and local nature of the variety of character within England, we can never hope to protect it, conserve it or even put right some of the damage we have done to it.

A better understanding of what we have now is at the heart of achieving sustainable development in the future.

The landscape descriptions and maps presented here, set out the qualities of today's countryside. They do not ascribe values to particular aspects of the countryside. That is for

others to do in a way which is appropriate to the particular purpose for which they want the information. The Countryside Agency will use it to inspire its work.

We have a unique legacy to bequeath to our children – a legacy not just of biodiversity; not just about landscape or history. It is the juxtaposition of town, country and coast; of land form and land use; of history and modern progress; it is, in two words, England's Character; and this book, along with its companion volumes, will tell you what that means.



Richard Simmonds
Chairman, Countryside Commission, 1996-1999

Introduction

The character of England

Think of England and the chances are that you will conjure up an image of the countryside.

That image might be of a willow lined river, quietly meandering through pastures, where cows graze. It might be of a windswept fell, cloaked in purple heather and bounded by crumbling grey stone walls. It might equally be of pylons marching across fields of yellow rape set against a steel grey sky. Or perhaps of dark sunken lanes cutting through chalk ridges crowned with beech and ash woodland. Your image, whatever it is, will grow in your mind as you begin to add in other things you associate with it - a distant church spire, the song of skylarks, the angular horizon of slag heaps, the sudden view across open downland to a hidden vale below.

This is the character of England's countryside. This and much more. We may each have our own particular image, a personal response to our own backgrounds and experiences - together these images reflect the rich and diverse character of England's countryside as a whole. Many different elements combine to create this character. Because of this there is tremendous variety in that character. To recognise the variation in countryside character is to understand how the many influences upon it combine to give a sense of place, to set a tract of countryside apart from adjacent areas. That is what this publication does.

Everywhere has character. As a society, we already place a higher value upon some areas of countryside than the rest. We do this with legislation by, for example, designating National Parks; by spending public money to help look after areas - through schemes such as Environmentally Sensitive Areas; and through our own behaviour, by going to certain places on holiday, for instance. Countryside character is present in all these areas and in the rest of the countryside. Recognising and understanding countryside character is equally important across the whole of England. How we choose to respond to that understanding is the next step, which is not undertaken in this publication.

Most of us have a strong sense of local pride. As we move rapidly towards a global society, we increasingly value the 'anchor' that our local identity gives us. We have pride in both our immediate surroundings, whether it be town or country, and also in feeling that we are part of something that is different, that has a unique sense of place. The character of the countryside is an important part of what many of us take pride in. It may be that we live in the countryside, or that it provides our workplace. It may be that we visit it often, or travel through it. It may even be that we have only experienced it through other media - literature, art, television. But for one or all of these reasons, we identify and take pride in the character of England's countryside.

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Two examples which show how the key characteristics of the South East & London combine to create character areas.

Thames Valley

The Thames Valley floodplain dominates the area as it spreads south from the Chilterns. Windsor Forest to the east and the steep river slopes in the north west of the valley are reminders of how the heavy clay soils were once thickly wooded. Elsewhere the trees have long been cleared for pasture or mineral extraction. Now gravel pits are a common feature.

The river winds across flat lands past well-populated towns such as Maidenhead and Slough and through the outer reaches of London. Here an extensive network of roads, railways and electricity pylons features prominently in the urban fringe landscape.

Historical and cultural associations characterise the valley, with Windsor Castle taking pride of place.

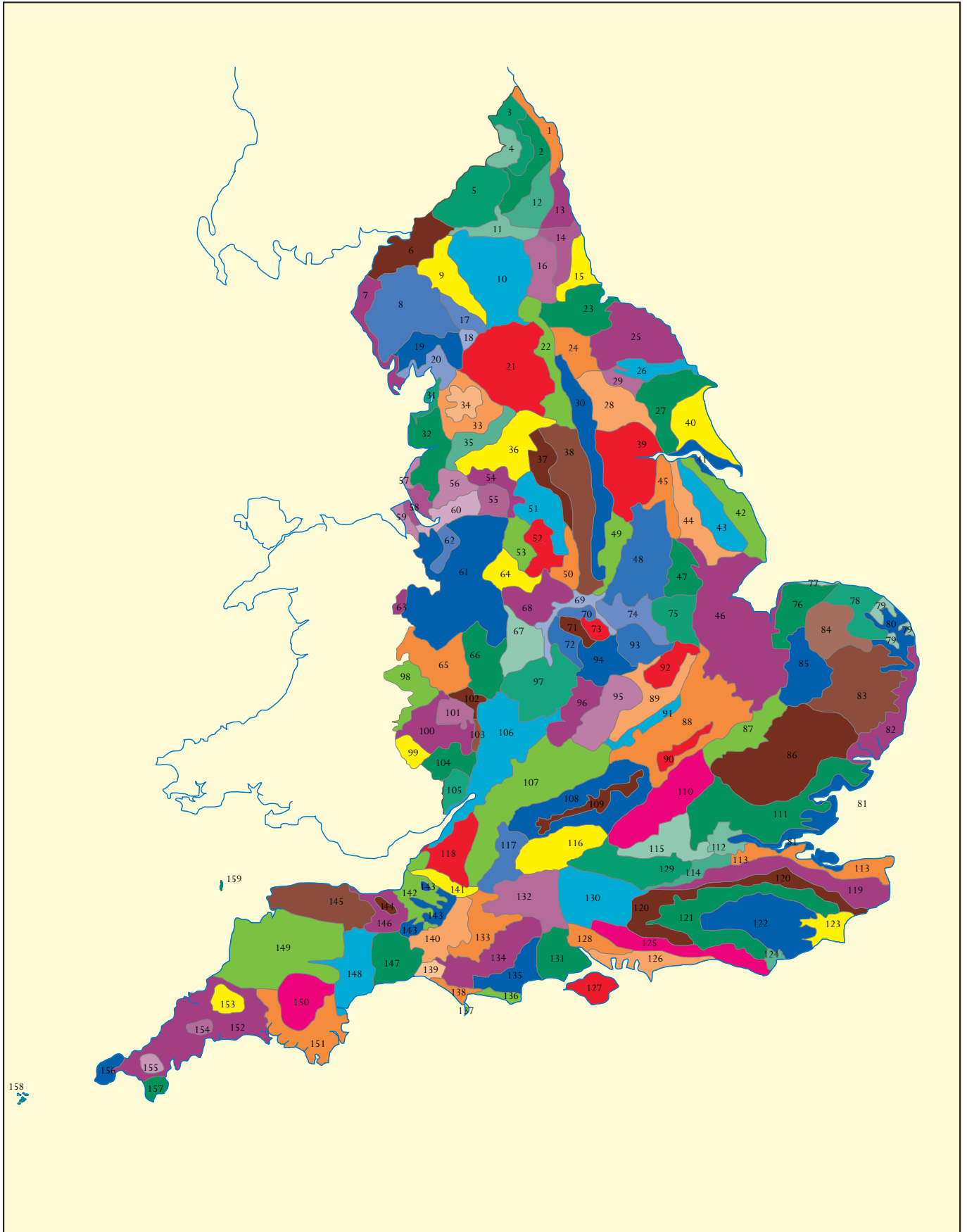
South Downs

With their rolling hills, steep slopes and sculptured dry valleys, the Downs form a typical chalk landscape. Viewed from the Weald, the dominant feature is the long ridge which runs from Winchester to culminate on Beachy Head's dramatic white sea cliffs. Areas of open short-turfed grassland, rich in orchids and other plants, are the result of intensive sheep grazing and give the Downs their characteristic smooth profile. River valleys cut through the hills to the coast, providing narrow belts of wet pasture, important for birds and invertebrates.

East of the meandering Cuckmere and its undeveloped estuary, one of the few on the south coast, tower the Seven Sisters cliffs. In marked contrast to the open grassland and arable areas of the east, the western end of the Downs is well-wooded.

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The Character of England: landscape, wildlife & natural features



The irony is that as we increasingly begin to appreciate our local distinctiveness, we are also beginning to realise how vulnerable that distinctiveness can be. In an age of mass production, standardisation, economies of scale and international markets, those elements of our countryside that have traditionally been driven by local influences are being quickly eroded. The materials and style of new buildings, the breed of cattle in the field, the shape of the hedgerows, the village sign, the farm gates and buildings are just a few examples. In all of these there is a trend towards uniformity: it is becoming ever more difficult to identify from your surroundings which part of the countryside you are in. It is, therefore, more important than ever that we understand what contributes to the character of England's countryside. Then, we can recognise the impact on this character of the decisions we take, both as individuals and as a society.

The Countryside Agency and countryside character

The Countryside Agency is concerned with the whole of England's countryside.

The English countryside is a priceless national asset. It is fundamental to our national identity as well as a rich source for our local identity. This is reflected in popular public opinion (*Public Attitudes to the Countryside*, Countryside Commission, CCP 481, 1997, £4). The most remarkable aspect of England's countryside is its diversity. The Countryside Agency believes that it is in the national interest to protect and strengthen this diversity. Our work to identify and describe the character of England, which we are publishing here, is intended to:

- raise awareness of the diversity of countryside character we enjoy;
- increase understanding of what contributes to that character and what may influence it in the future; and
- encourage everyone to respect the character of the countryside and take account of it in everything that they do.

The Countryside Agency's predecessor, the Countryside, Commission, had a long association with areas of the countryside that are designated as being of national importance (such as the National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty). It was active for many years in trying to encourage greater understanding and more active management of the wider countryside. Through this work, it became apparent that we lacked a consistent and comprehensive understanding of what gave the countryside of England its character. This is an essential starting point for guiding our own policies and decisions and for encouraging others to take account of the impact of their own decisions on the countryside.

The Countryside Commission worked with other bodies to develop the technique of landscape assessment (*Landscape assessment guidance*, Countryside Commission, 1993, CCP 423). This identifies those things that are having an influence on a tract of countryside and describes how the landscape reflects this. It has been applied at a wide range of scales, for a variety of purposes. Even so, much of England's countryside had never had such an assessment carried out which made it impossible to build up a national picture using landscape assessments.

The Countryside Commission identified the need for a new approach, which looked at the whole of England's countryside. This would use a consistent approach nationally. It would need to be at a broad enough scale to give national coverage, whilst ensuring that significant variation in the character of the countryside was picked up. It would provide a consistent national framework within which more detailed local landscape assessments would sit. This approach, which the Countryside Agency has fully adopted, is described in more detail below.

How we have defined the character of England's countryside

Our approach to mapping and describing the character of England's countryside can best be described as a combination of computer based statistical analysis and the consistent application of structured landscape assessment techniques. We initially piloted the approach in the south west of England (*The New Map of Enaland: A Celebration of the South Western Landscape*, Countryside Commission, CCP 444, 1994, £20) from which a successful methodology was developed that was suitable for extending to the national scale. The south west pilot study produced a map of cohesive landscape character areas.

As part of the study, we asked a cross section of the public if they identified with the character areas produced – they did. On the strength of the pilot study, the Commission decided to develop the methodology for use nationally.

The National Mapping Project

The character of the countryside is the result of many different factors or variables. It is the way in which these combine that gives broad areas of the countryside a cohesive and distinctive character. The National Mapping project looked at how these variables combined across England as a basis for the mapping of distinctive character areas. The approach involved:

- identifying the variables that needed to be included;
- obtaining information on each variable for every 1 kilometre square of England; these are called the national data sets;
- combining all the national data sets through a computer based statistical analysis technique, known as TWINSPAN;

- using the results of the TWINSPAN analysis to inform the mapping of cohesive character areas.

The **variables** – these included physical influences (geological, topographical and soils based) and cultural and historical influences (human activity). They were selected by an inter-agency group which the Countryside Commission set up to oversee the countryside character work, following a lot of background research on availability of data and the feasibility of national coverage. In particular, the involvement of English Nature and English Heritage was essential in this process, ensuring that both the ecological and historical dimensions were properly reflected.

The **national data sets** – 12 national data sets were used. These are described in the box opposite. They were put together in a variety of different ways. Some simply had to be extracted from existing source material (eg altitude), others required interpretation of existing information (eg surface geology and ecological character). Some had to be specially created through empirical research (eg field pattern and density and industrial history).

Each data set has a number of attributes. The number of attributes varied between data sets. For example, the settlement pattern data set has only seven attributes, relating to the extent to which settlement is dispersed or clustered together. By contrast, the surface geology data set has 27 attributes reflecting the variety of solid and drift deposits occurring. For each data set, every kilometre square of England was assigned an attribute; hence, each kilometre square has 12 attributes. Full information on the attributes is contained in a Technical Report (*Countryside Character Initiative National Mapping Project, technical report of the computer phase, June 1997, Chris Blandford Associates – unpublished*). A map of each of the national data sets was produced, illustrating the distribution of all attributes across the country. Some examples of these as they relate to the South East & London region are shown in Figures 1 – 5 overleaf.

TWINSPAN analysis – the details of this process are set out in the Technical Report. The basic principle is that all the kilometre squares in the sample (the whole of England) can be divided up into a number of groups on the basis of the presence or absence of a particular attribute. This subdivision continues until an appropriate number of end groups are reached, each of which will contain kilometre squares with similar attributes. The map which resulted from this then informed the definition of character areas.

Map images were derived from the TWINSPAN analysis using all the national data sets and four selected physiographical data sets, respectively. They illustrate how physical factors, such as landform and geology, strongly influence character at the regional and national scale and how historical and cultural factors are significant in providing the more local variation on these broader patterns.

The National Datasets

Altitude: 10 altitudinal attributes, based on Ordnance Survey Digital Terrain Model

Landform: 10 landform classification attributes, based on original interpretation of existing altitude and slope data

Ecological characteristics: 12 ecological character attributes, using drainage and base status as determinants; provided by Soil Survey and Land Research Centre

Land capability: 7 inherent agricultural land capability attributes, based on soil type and drainage characteristics; provided by Soil Survey and Land Research Centre

Surface geology: 27 surface geology attributes, derived from existing data on solid and drift geology; provided by British Geological Survey

Farm types: 17 categories of farm type, based on Standard Man Day data recorded through MAFF agricultural census; provided by Resource Planning Team, ADAS

Settlement patterns: 7 settlement pattern attributes, based on categorisation of Royal Mail Delivery Point Data; provided by Birkbeck College, University of London

Woodland cover: 8 attributes for woodland type and categories of percentage cover, derived from interpretation of Bartholomew's 1:100000 map series; based on Ordnance Survey

Field density & pattern: 16 categories of field pattern and field density, based on original interpretation of map data by Lancaster University Archaeological Unit, on behalf of Countryside Commission and English Heritage

Visible Archaeology: 12 attributes combining visibility and period, based on interpretation of original data on monuments and linear features provided by the National Monuments Record Centre of the Royal Commission for Historic Monuments in England

Industrial History: 16 categories of dominant industrial history, based on original interpretation of map and documentary sources by Lancaster University Archaeological Unit, on behalf of Countryside Commission and English Heritage

Designed parkland: 7 extant parkland density attributes, derived from comparison of 1918 Ordnance Survey series with current 1:50000 Ordnance Survey

Examples from the Countryside Character Programme National Mapping Project related to the South East & London region



Figure 1
FARM TYPES

Reproduced and adapted from an original provided by FRCA.

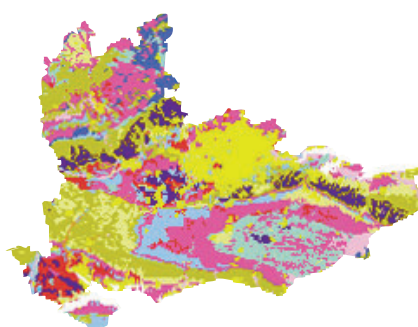


Figure 2
ECOLOGICAL CHARACTER

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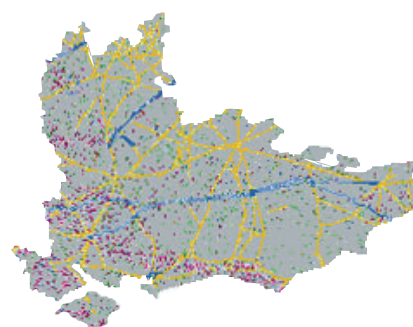


Figure 3
VISIBLE ARCHAEOLOGY

Based on information supplied by kind permission of RCHME.

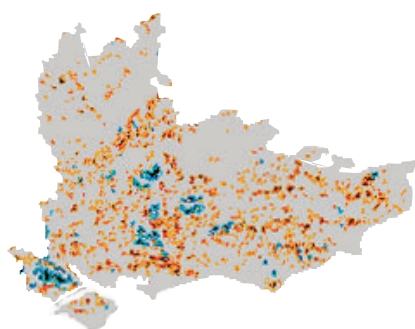


Figure 4
WOODLAND COVER

Based on the Ordnance Survey Map © Crown Copyright 1998
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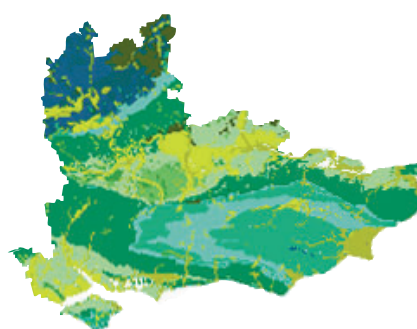


Figure 5
SURFACE GEOLOGY

Geological map © NERC. All rights reserved. Topographical map © Crown Copyright reserved.

For all the above figures, colour visual representations derived from IDRISI image for information purposes only. Coastline is an approximation.

Informing the character mapping – the process outlined above was then used to help inform the definition of character areas, broad tracts of countryside exhibiting a cohesive character. This was also based upon a more conventional landscape assessment approach, which drew upon the knowledge and experience of a wide range of people involved in countryside planning and management, a considerable body of existing landscape assessment work and some limited additional fieldwork. The results of the TWINSPAN process were used to validate this more subjective view of countryside character and ensure that the character areas were defined in a consistent way across the whole of England.

The Character of England map: a joint approach

English Nature and English Heritage have both been closely associated with the development of the countryside character approach. English Heritage, as the government agency responsible for the historic dimension of the countryside, worked closely with the Countryside Commission in developing and sourcing the cultural and historical data sets, and advising on the broader process of characterisation. English Nature similarly worked with the Countryside Commission in respect of the soils derived data sets (ecological character and land capability) but their involvement in the mapping process has been more fundamental.

English Nature developed a similar approach to identifying and mapping the countryside according to the distribution of habitats and natural features, which they refer to as natural areas. This work was brought into the definition of character areas with a view to a single joint map of landscape, wildlife and natural features being produced. This was achieved, and the map is shown on page 7. Both English Nature and the Countryside Agency now work from the basis of this joint framework. Both recognise all the character areas identified on it. However, because physical influences are of primary importance in determining ecological variations, English Nature often aggregate the joint character areas into their larger natural areas.

Describing the character of England

Having identified and mapped the character of England, we have gone on to describe each of the character areas shown on the map. It is the descriptions for the character areas in the South East & London that are contained in this publication.

The descriptions have been developed through the wide ranging consultation process referred to above, which also informed the character mapping. Views from interested parties have been sought and material drawn from a great variety of sources. Nationally, over 800 people have contributed, through meetings, seminars and written comment.

For each area, the description seeks to evoke what sets it apart from any other. It aims to put our mental image of that area into words. Each description also provides an explanation of how that character has arisen and how it is changing, and gives some pointers to future management issues. The descriptions are not intended to prescribe any particular course of action as a response to that; only to inform the decision making process.

The character of England: shaping the future

The material contained in this publication describes the character of England's countryside at the end of the 20th century. This character has evolved over thousands of years, as a result of a complex interaction between nature and human activity. The pace of change over that time has ebbed and flowed and will continue to do so. The character of England is dynamic.

The identification and description of the character of England's countryside does not mean that we are seeking to 'freeze' that character at this moment in time. The purpose of the work is to ensure that we understand - from a widely accepted common reference point - the character of England's countryside. Only in this way can we all take proper account of that in all the decisions we make which will have a bearing on it. Greater awareness and understanding will engender greater respect and local pride. This will inform and shape change to make a positive contribution to strengthening countryside character.

We envisage this happening in a number of ways; for example by:

- **focusing national policies** – decisions and activities that have a major bearing on the character of the countryside are often driven by national and international policies, such as land use planning or the Common Agricultural Policy. There is increasing recognition that such policies need to be developed and applied more flexibly at a regional scale to improve their effectiveness and make them more responsive to local needs and priorities. The character of England provides a framework which can be used to provide a regional resolution for such policies, so that they take more account of the needs and opportunities within each region.
- **giving national meaning to local action** – encouraging local pride lies at the heart of ensuring that the character of England continues in all its diversity into the future. Local people have the greatest potential of all to recognise and strengthen local distinctiveness. The character of England provides a national context for local action, strengthening the link between local and national heritage, and providing a source of information and ideas to feed into local decision making.

Countryside Character is being published in 8 volumes, following the boundaries of the administrative areas of the Government Offices for the Regions:

North East

North West

Yorkshire & the Humber

East Midlands

West Midlands

East of England

South East & London

South West

(Merseyside is included in the North West volume.)