

CORNWALL AND ISLES OF SCILLY LANDSCAPE CHARACTER STUDY



Landscape Character Area Description

LCA - Helford Ria

LCA No

CA09

JCA

Constituent LDUs

Total 11: 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 104, 125,
156, 367, 368, 369



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- Location** Stream valleys and slopes around the Helford River, from St Anthony-in-Meneage in the south, west to the eastern outskirts of Helston, then along the north flank to the south-western edge of Falmouth.
- Designations** All component LDUs are either completely or partly within the Cornwall AONB; 5 LDUs contain SSSIs. 5 LDUs contain SACs; 7 contain SMs and there is 1 CGS site.

Description

A sheltered deepwater ria on the western side of Falmouth Bay on the south Cornish coast. The broad riverscape is enclosed by steep slopes with extensive mature broadleaved woodland which is internationally important Ancient Woodland. The numerous small creeks around the river are enclosed by their steep, well-wooded slopes but have wide-spreading views out over the Helford River from vantage points on the valley sides. Much of the woodland is truly ancient and has been identified as Upland Oakwood with some Upland Mixed Ashwoods. There are distinct groups of ornamental pine planting on the valley sides, around houses. The coastal areas which flow from each side of the mouth of the Helford both have a narrow rough coastal strip, backed by pastures. The small upland ridges between the creeks support a mix of pastoral and arable farmland (with a network of Cornish hedges with trees) that takes advantage of the sheltered slopes and fertile loamy soils. The settlement pattern on the ridges is one of isolated houses and farmsteads and some villages such as Mawnan Smith, where linear development has taken place along the roads. The main focus of settlement however is along the creeks and at river crossings where small historic nucleated villages such as Port Navas, Gweek, Helford Passage and Helford nestle. Local village vernacular is one of granite and cob with mainly slate and some thatch, many of which are rendered and painted in pastel colours. The sheltered and intimate nature of this landscape gives a domestic feel which is almost Mediterranean due to the bright houses with exotic garden planting and estate gardens. The river changes constantly, heavily influenced by the tides which fall back daily to reveal ecologically important intertidal mudflats. The area itself has a busy character, particularly around the river where many recreational boats and yachts join shellfish boats, fishing boats and ferries. Many of the boats moor at Gweek at the head of the ria, whilst others moor in the river itself or in the tidal creeks at characteristic small quays and jetties. Tourism development has occurred in the villages and the tight winding lanes throng with cars in the summer months.

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Key Landscape Characteristics

Sheltered deepwater ria with a broad river system and feeder creeks.

Steep sided valleys covered in dense, mature broadleaved woodland.

Dramatic scenery of varying scale, with extensive river views from higher land.

Pastoral or mixed farmland with trees on the gently undulating plateau which surrounds the ria, with a medium scale, predominantly medieval field pattern.

Flatter coastal zone to the north of the river, with pasture and rough grazing, cliff habitats and mixed tree groups.

Bracken and scrub-covered east-facing coastline outside mouth of river.

Wooded parkland estates (Glendurgan and Trebah); groups of trees and woodland in field corners on the plateau and trees on Cornish Hedges.

Distinctive groups of Monterey pines which contrast with the broadleaved woodland.

Dominant intertidal mudflats in the river corridor.

Large Saline Lagoon with reedbeds at Swanpool.

Clustered settlement pattern with small often isolated farms and nucleated villages along the creeks; lime wash on granite buildings is locally characteristic, as is cob.

Recreational use of the river by sailing boats with numerous moorings and small quays and significant recreation, tourism and amenity centred on traditional villages.

Geology and soils

A low hard rock plateau supporting shallow hard rock soils. Middle Devonian slates, greywacke and siltstones produce well-drained fine loamy soils.

Topography and drainage

A gently undulating plateau on either side of a steep sided valley system of rias or drowned river valleys. This is a complex of small tidal creeks around the wide main river.

Biodiversity

This Landscape Character Area has a high proportion of Ancient Woodland on the valley sides of the ria (often dominated by Sessile Oak) with large areas of plantation and scrub with smaller areas of mixed broadleaved woodland. Much of this has been identified as Upland Oakwood with some Upland Mixed Ashwoods. Much of the woodland is truly ancient, at least medieval in origin. These woods are important internationally and are one of the few places in the country where extensive ancient woodland meets the sea. In the Maenporth and Swanpool valleys Wet Woodland and Fens are found, with Swanpool being identified as a Saline Lagoon with some small areas of Reedbeds. Small narrow areas of Wet Woodland are also found in the north part of the LCA in the small south-flowing valleys, with very small fragments of Lowland Heathland and Fens. These form part of the narrow corridors of semi-natural vegetation in the small valleys, and link to the broadleaved woodland and Ancient Woodland on the lower sections of the valleys. An area of Lowland Wood-Pasture and Parkland is found at Penjerrick. The Landscape Character Area has a long sinuous coastline with very small areas of Coastal Saltmarsh found at the upper parts of the ria mostly at Gweek, linking to the extensive Intertidal Mudflats along the river. The coastal strip along the eastern part of the LCA of maritime cliff, scrub, bracken, unimproved grassland and broadleaved woodland provides a visual contrast as well as an important corridor of varied habitats. Much of the farmed land is

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improved grassland and arable with the Cornish hedges, having a high proportion of mature trees, forming ecological corridors between the farmed land and the semi-natural areas. The Helford estuary forms part of the Fal and Helford SAC and is a Voluntary Marine Conservation Area which seeks to reconcile the pressures on the Helford with the significant biodiversity it contains.

Land Cover

An area of mixed farmland with trees, with estates and notable gardens. The main feature is the broad tidal river and its many creeks with their well wooded steeply sloping sides.

Land Use

There is a significant variation in the balance of farming land use between areas of parkland, recreational and amenity use. Mixed farmland dominates the ridges between the creeks, exploiting the sheltered slopes and rich fertile soils. In the protecting shelter of the side valleys important gardens have been developed. There is some rough grazing on the rocky low cliffs. The river carries a small-scale fishing industry, including oyster dredging and is used extensively for leisure boating. There is boat building at Gweek.

Field and woodland pattern

Field boundaries are predominantly sinuous Cornish hedges with trees around small fields, based on medieval field patterns. North and west of the ria there are also substantial areas of post-medieval enclosure of rough ground, with straight boundaries and mostly rectilinear form. However, the field pattern appears medium to large in scale, distorted by the convex slopes and rolling topography. The woodland lining the waters edge makes a significant visual impact.

Settlement pattern

This is an area of villages that exist as small nuclei at the head or edge of creeks and mainly of medieval origin, emphasising the past importance of river and sea communications. The exception is Mawnan Smith, which appears to have grown up as a post-medieval crossroads settlement. More recent 20th century development occurs as large houses in extensive grounds overlooking the river at Porth Navas and Helford Passage with more modern building around Maenporth and Mawnan Smith. The vernacular architecture of these villages is distinct: small white cottages are clustered together, some terraced and most with colourful gardens whose exotic plants create an exotic Mediterranean atmosphere.

Transport pattern

Generally the area is served by winding sunken lanes with overhanging vegetation, although there are areas of straight roads rolling over hills with associated ribbon development. The coastal path runs around part of the river system.

Historic features

Remains of numerous late prehistoric defended farmsteads (rounds) survive on the slopes overlooking the Helford from north and south, demonstrating the well-settled character of the area at this period. Several villages and farms have old quays, wharves and/or warehouses and Gweek was once the main port for Helston. In the post-medieval period granite was shipped out from Port Navas. On the south-facing slopes are the valley gardens of Glendurgan (National Trust) and Trebah. Other notable buildings include large medieval country houses and associated estates, such as Carwinion, Bosahan, and Merthen. This Landscape Character Area also includes much of the estate of Trelowarren.

Condition

An intact and well managed landscape with mature tree structure although ecological corridors declining with land use change and recreational pressure on the estuary. Impact of rural housing is low and

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localised. Watersports and casual fishing for shellfish are growing in popularity, presenting problems with the oyster and other shellfish industries, disturbing natural habitats and disrupting the tranquillity of the valleys. The river appears to accommodate recreational pressure better than the creeks, perhaps due to differences in scale. Some woodlands are poorly managed, with invasion of sycamore and beech in the sessile oak woodland, and some hedgerows are starting to decline. National Trust land is well managed. Many old quays are in poor condition.

Pressures

- Widening and straightening of roads and associated transport infrastructure/ modern street furniture.
- Enlarged and improved accesses to the river.
- Increases in demand for housing and holiday accommodation.
- Overuse of the river and its resources.
- Changes in farming practices - growing bio-fuels.

Aesthetic and sensory

A richly varied and inspirational landscape of river and creeks framed by field boundaries and wooded slopes; small scale and moderately tranquil. The enclosure and shelter gives it a special atmosphere and quality, contrasting with the more exposed landscape of the Lizard. From the creeks, outward views to the river have great impact. In some areas mixed farmland appears untidy or unmanaged.

Distinctive features

Steeply sloping valleys with mature woodland down to the water's edge. The busy broad river and narrow, secret creeks. Compact villages linked by winding narrow lanes. Renowned valley gardens.

Visions and objectives

A busy landscape from the amount of water borne activity on the river hemmed in by the dramatic oak woodlands down to the waters edge. The sheltered valleys and creeks have encouraged settlement and the development of exotic gardens. The objective must be to maintain the high visual quality and distinctive local landscape character of the area.

Planning and Land Management Guidelines

Enhance woodland along creeks by careful management to maintain a balanced and well mixed age structure and appropriate species mix, with emphasis on sycamore control.

Promote a strategy for development control to ensure new development is appropriately sited and integrated into its surroundings in a sustainable manner.

Develop a strategy for the use of the river making provision for the fishing industry and conservation issues as well as for recreational pursuits.

Ensure the restoration and conservation of historic gardens.

Conserve and restore ecological corridors by resisting inappropriate recreational activities and promoting those that may contribute to an appreciation of biodiversity.

Conserve character of local transport network by resisting pressure to 'improve' via straightening, widening and other transport associated infrastructure such as kerbing and signage.

Encourage alternative methods of travel and consider extending the coast path around the upper river valley.

Conserve and restore historic maritime features.

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