

## 7.0 THE CENTRAL MENDIP HILLS

7.1 *The Central Mendip Hills* comprise four character areas which are shown on Figure 6.

- *Black Down and The Northern Slopes* (A1).
- *The Harptree Chewton Edge* (A2).
- *The Mendip Plateau* (A3).
- *The Mendip South Western Slopes* (A4).

The last area can be sub-divided into:

- The Draycott-Westbury Slopes (A4.1).
- The Strawberry Belt (A4.2).
- Ebbor Gorge and the Upper Axe (A4.3).
- The Wells Bowl (A4.4).

The city of Wells lies at the junction of the Wells Bowl (A4.3) the Wookey Islands (G) and the Sheppey Valley (A6). Its general character and landscape setting are described in CBA's study *A Landscape Assessment of the Fringes of the Towns of Mendip District* (pp. 1-13). All of the character areas are described in *A Landscape Assessment of the Mendip Hills* and the text given here differs from that study only where parts of the character areas lie outside the district.

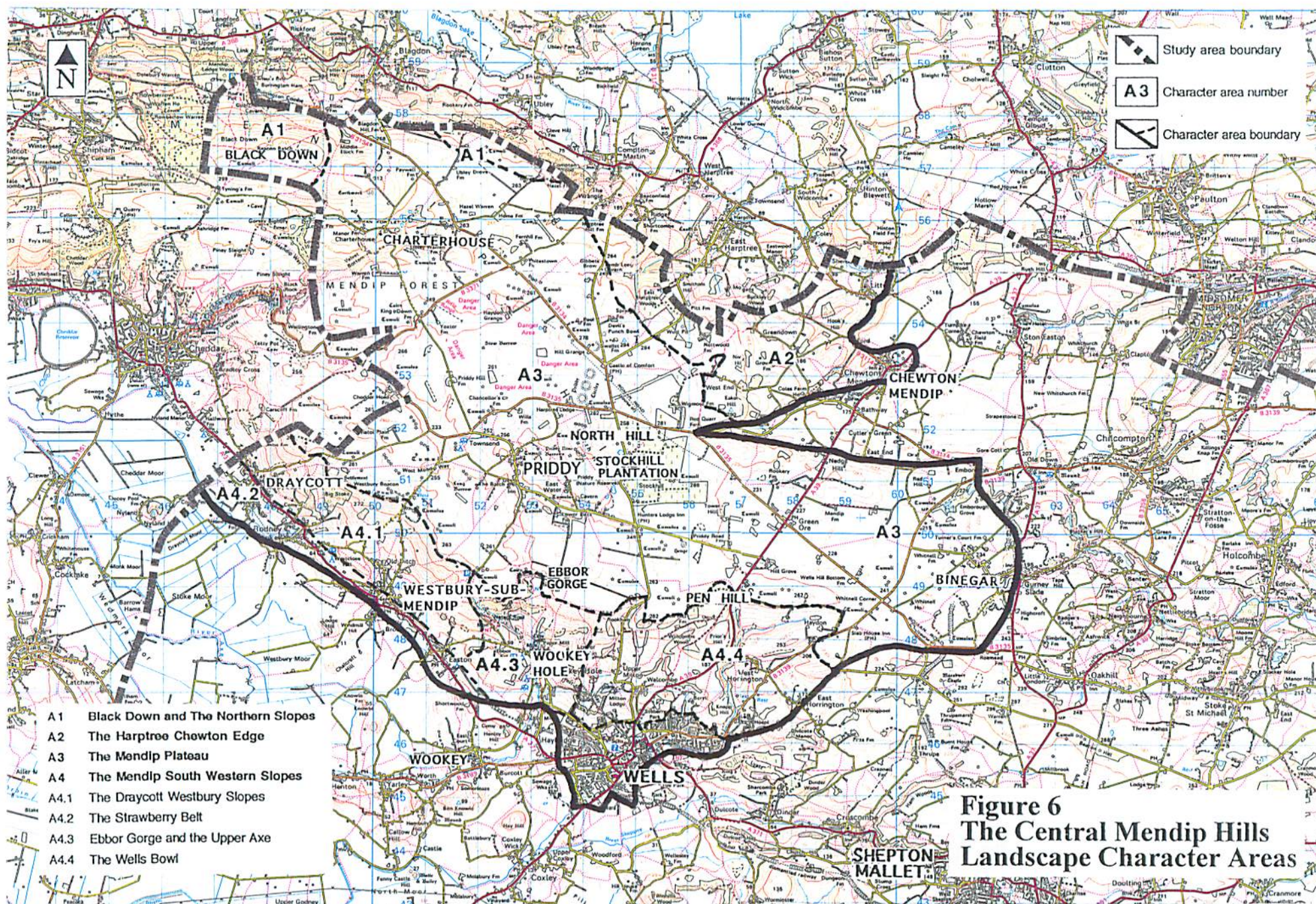
## 7.2 Black Down and the Northern Slopes

- Abrupt junction with plateau
- Spectacular views
- Contrast between Down and adjacent cultivated land
- Wild, heathland character to Down
- Steep hedged pasture contrasting with drystone walls of Plateau

7.2.1 This character area comprises Black Down and a small part of the Northern Slopes which lie mainly outside the district. The rounded, heather-dominated landform of Black Down is one of the most conspicuous landmark on the Mendip Hills (Photograph 1). The crest of the Down is marked by Bronze Age barrows still prominent under the mantle of heather. The lesser earthworks that can be seen near them are the remains of a 'decoy town' built during the last war to draw enemy bombers away from Bristol. The abrupt contrast of the moorland with the cultivated landscapes that abut its eastern and southern sides is its dominant characteristic. To the north, outside the district, it tumbles into scrub at the upper edge of Burrington Combe. Although the black grouse that once bred on the Down have long since gone, it has a distinctly upland moorland character, emphasised by its abrupt boundaries and wide views to the contrasting landscapes' that surround it (Photograph 1).

7.2.2 The small area of the *Northern Slopes* within the district is steep pasture land with small hedged fields and is best considered in the context of







the *Blagdon-Compton Martin Slopes* described in the *Mendip Hills Landscape Assessment* on pp 45-45.

### 7.3 The Harptree-Chewton Edge

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|--|---------------------------------|
| • Irregular, gentle slopes                   | • Small, irregular field shapes |
| • Springs, wet depressions and ponds         | • Variable hedges               |
| • Scattered small woodland and scrub patches | • Patches of drystone walls     |
| • Winding lanes                              | • Gruffy ground                 |
| • Scattered settlement                       | • Mining evidence               |
|  | • Lynchets                      |
|  | • Small parklands               |

7.3.1 In some respects the Harptree-Chewton Edge is a transition between Central and East Mendip (Photograph 2). However, the area has a distinctive pattern of landform and vegetation. It broadens out from the steep slopes west of Compton Martin to gentler valleys, and springs emerge high up on the slopes, feeding streams that flow down to the River Chew. Woodland, scrub and patches of rushy pasture are frequent on the steeper slopes around the springs. An intricate network of lanes run down and across the slopes, serving cottages, farmsteads and manor houses. The small, irregular fields are bounded by managed and unmanaged hedges, and in a few localised patches by low limestone walls. The character area ends quite abruptly east of Chewton at its junction with the Northern and Eastern Farmlands (A7).

7.3.2 The Harptree-Chewton area was a centre of post-medieval mining activity and this has partially shaped the landscape. There are numerous ponds and sites of shafts on the steep-sided valleys, and there is abundant gruffy ground, especially towards the top of the slope around Lambs Leer Cavern and East Harptree Woods. The restored chimney of the Smitham Hill re-smelting works just outside the district is the most obvious landmark of all.

7.3.3 Chewton Mendip lies at the sheltered head of the Chew Valley with particularly prominent lynchets high on the valley side above. There is some dispersed modern settlement along the A34, but the compact old centre lies to the west. It is dominated by the fifteenth century church tower which is visible over a wide area from the east, north and west.

### 7.4 The Mendip Plateau

- |  |                                   |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| • Drystone walls                                       | • Rectilinear field pattern       |
| • Sparse settlement                                    | • Prehistoric ritual landscapes   |
| • Long views   | • Gently undulating landform      |
| • Little surface water                                 | • Openness and remoteness         |
| • Straight roads                                       | • Swallets and closed depressions |
| • Gruffy ground  | • Ash pollards                    |
| • Rough pasture  | • Conifer plantations             |
| • Small beech and conifer plantations and shelterbelts |                                   |

7.4.1 The north eastern and south western boundaries of the Plateau are clear. The rectilinear field pattern ends abruptly at the start of the steep

slopes, where a wholly different landform, hedgerow and woodland pattern start (Photograph 3). Neale (1976, 90) notes that the continuous hedgelines at the junction of these two areas, such as that above Westbury, mark a much older dividing line than that of the enclosure period. To the north-west, the plateau character begins abruptly where Black Down ends, and continues westwards. The south eastern boundary, where the land gradually tumbles down towards the Leigh/Binegar/Coleford Slopes, is more difficult to define. The drystone walls and battered ash pollards which characterise the plateau begin to thin out beyond the A39, but the land is nevertheless part of the Plateau (Photograph 4). A boundary line can best be drawn from the edge of the Cranmore Ridge, past Whitnell and Coldharbour Farms, to pass just west of Emborough.

- 7.4.2 The character of the Plateau has been crystallised by Coysh (1977, 2 ): it is an '*upland country with a bare, bleak landscape with rolling, olive-green fields, bordered by grey loose stone walls. Its remoteness and level surface give this Mendip land a strange desolation*'. In fact, the surface is gently undulating rather than flat, dropping down to the upper reaches of the head valleys of Cheddar Gorge and around Priddy, but rising to ridges like North Hill where the heathy ground and barrows of the Nine Barrows and Ashen Hill groups appear against the skyline. The limestone walls contribute to the upland character (partly, perhaps, from their association with remoter limestone landscapes) but they are not universal. Hedges were quite often planted instead, and they give a softer appearance to the landscape. The shelterbelts and small copses of beech, sycamore and conifers,

especially where they are wind-shaped, add to the upland character, although trees locally provide both distinctive landmarks and a sense of enclosure. The overall feeling of openness in a sparsely-settled landscape is emphasised for the traveller by the long, straight roads with grassy verges. There are often spectacular views from the edge, such as that westwards from Tynings Farm as far as Steep Holm.

- 7.4.3 Gruffy ground can be seen in many places. These include: the area around Charterhouse; the land between the Miners Arms and the site of the St Cuthberts works; and the land around the top of the Chewton-Harptree slopes elsewhere. However, much disturbed ground can be seen from the roadside elsewhere, as can karst features of swallets and closed depressions. The general absence of surface water gives added interest to the reservoirs and ponds that survive from the mining industry, now often reed dominated and of nature conservation interest.
- 7.4.4 Within the overriding character of the Plateau there are several distinctive areas. *Charterhouse* is a '*lovely windswept place, surrounded by deserted mine workings, dark moorland and rough stone walls*' (Athill 1976, 118). The earthworks of the Roman settlement can be seen below Rains Batch, with the gruffy ground, pools and woodland of Nether Wood beyond providing great visual interest. The gruffy ground extends along Velvet Bottom, past the church which originated as a miners' hall, to Long Wood. The area is largely SSSI, contiguous with the designated area of Cheddar Gorge. The ponds, scrub, grassland and heathland and woodland are of high nature conservation



value. Woodland extends southwards along the steep-sided valley below Lower Farm. Lead-tolerant grasses and plants like spring sandwort populate the gruffy ground, and the ponds formed during the mid-nineteenth century re-smelting operations are important for invertebrates, especially dragonflies.

7.4.5 The *Priddy* area has many features which make it stand out from the rest of the plateau. The fields surrounding the village stop where the ground rises to the heathland of North Hill. At Yoxter Rifle Range and Chancellors Farm species-rich grassland and damp grass-heath that stand out from the uniformity of the agriculturally improved areas. Just to the east, Priddy Circles can be seen underlying the enclosure landscape. The sprawling village is shrunken from its extent at the height of active mining, and consists of cottages and farm houses scattered along a network of lanes beginning at Pelting Drove. It is surrounded by small irregular fields in strong contrast to the rectilinear pattern beyond.

7.4.6 From the site of *St Cuthberts* re-smelting works, gruffy ground and ponds extend northwards. On the eastern side of the B3134, *Stock Hill Plantation* covers a large area of gruffy ground and also archaeological sites. Although lead contamination has made healthy growth difficult in some areas, the plantation is nevertheless a distinctive landmark on the Hills, as are the *East Harptree Woods* to the north, at the junction of the plateau and the Chewton-Harptree edge.

7.4.7 The *eastern end of the plateau* becomes softer in character for a number of reasons. Stone walls are less frequent, the hedges are lush, and sycamore and beech replace ash as hedgerow trees. There are long views towards the gentler landscape of East Mendip and outwards from the study area, but the strong rectilinear field pattern remains.

7.4.8 The landscape of the plateau is subject to a number of pressures. Outdoor pig farming has become popular in recent years, notably around Kings Down Farm. Agricultural improvement, with the removal or neglect of traditional boundaries, and intensively managed land, is apparent in places such as Tynings Farm, while post-and-wire fences have replaced hedgerows and drystone walls in some places. The removal of surface features like gruffy ground or the ploughing up of species-rich grassland may be less of a problem today, but even quite routine agricultural operations like fertiliser application can have a major effect on the visual character and wildlife interest of pastures. Soil and turf stripping are also acknowledged but unquantified pressures, and the infilling of swallets and closed depressions has been widely discussed.

## 7.5 The Mendip South Western Slopes

7.5.1 This character area is a substantial part of the complex slopes on the southern side of the Mendip Hills. They extend from the western edge of the district to the Cranmore Slopes (A5). The slopes are more gently sloping than the northern side of the Mendip Hills with greater

variety of gradient and a more complex settlement pattern. (Photograph 5) Although they have quite frequent woodland, this tends to be in valleys and places like Ebbor Gorge. The slopes thus often appear to be quite lightly wooded and are dominated by the intricate pattern of irregular field shapes, overgrown hedges and intermittent hedgerow trees. Below the Draycott-Wesbury Slopes (A4.1) the eastern section of the Strawberry Belt (A4.2), which starts around Cheddar extends as a narrow strip as far as Westbury. From Easton eastwards the slopes begin to broaden out, first to an area around Ebbor and the Upper Axe at Wookey Hole (A4.3) and then to the narrow dry valleys at the edge of the Plateau which fall into the irregular bowl around Wells (A4.4). At its eastern end, the Bowl merges with the Sheppey Valley (A7.)

#### *The Draycott - Westbury Slopes*

- Woodlands and downland of scenic and nature conservation interest
- Small, irregular fields in complex patterns
- Overgrown hedges
- Winding lanes and trackways
- Complex ancient settlement pattern
- Varied skyline with hillforts

7.5.2 This area is an intricate mixture of small irregular fields and overgrown hedges. Perhaps because of their southerly aspect and more gentle gradients, the slopes attracted settlement and expansion of field

systems in the high Middle Ages. The best example of these deserted settlements is at Ramspits, but there are also sites towards Wells and at Rodney Stoke (Aston and Burrow 1982, 131). There are conspicuous lynchets above Westbury related to planning of a new deer park at Lodge Hill.

7.5.3 The skyline at the sharp junction with the Plateau has several distinctive features, not least the hillfort above Stoke Woods and Westbury Beacon. The rounded hillock between Stoke Woods and Draycott, with its irregular hedge pattern, is also particularly prominent. Holloways and tracks wind up the slopes, following the easiest routes, and Westbury has expanded up the most gentle of these gradients as far as Old Ditch.

#### *The Strawberry Belt*

- Many small, rectangular fields
- Glasshouses and market gardening
- Abandoned plots
- Dramatic views across levels
- Small, mainly conglomerate villages
- Historic links with levels, slopes and plateau

7.5.4 Fertile Head deposits are the basis of the Strawberry Belt around Draycott and Rodney Stoke. A narrower, less fertile fringe continues eastwards to the Axe. Small rectangular fields are a common feature of the belt, and are particularly conspicuous alongside the road through



Draycott and from elevated viewpoints. This is a landscape of market gardening. Glass houses and temporary shelters are frequent, and in some areas there is an unkempt appearance where cultivation has been abandoned. Roadside stands and sheds for direct sale add to this effect. Because the villages are inter-visible on the undulating ground, the road corridor has a cluttered and almost urban-fringe appearance at times. In sharp contrast, the long views south and south west, where the landscape of the Levels is broken up by wooded islands like Nyland Hill and Lodge Hill, are outstanding.

- 7.5.5 The old centre of Draycott village is dominated by conglomerate buildings (the polished form of the stone is known as Draycott Marble) and the regular pattern of lanes shows all the signs of a planned settlement. Rodney Stoke lies mainly around the A371, but Barrow Wood Lane leads from the present village centre to a small church on a low ridge at the edge of the Levels. Westbury church also lies south of the main road, with the main part of the village in a bowl extending to the foot of the slopes, but sprawling along the main road to post-war developments like Stoneleigh. Easton lies on a ledge at the junction with the Levels. It has modern housing with a small and modest older centre.

### *Ebbor Gorge and the Upper Axe*

- Intricate landform with deep valleys
- Woodland and grassland of high nature conservation interest
- Caves of high archaeological interest
- Old mining sites
- Estate village

- 7.5.6 The ridge descending from Deer Leap to Wattles Hill falls on its eastern edge to a steep wooded gorge at Ebbor. This is separated by a shoulder of land from the steep-sided little valley where the River Axe gushes out of the hillside at Wookey Hole. To the east, Milton Hill separates the headwater of the Axe from the Wells Bowl.
- 7.5.7 Ebbor Gorge is a geologically complex area where Millstone Grit and Coal Measures have been thrust up through the limestone. Manganese, iron and ochre have been mined here and the Gorge has a steep, rocky character with many outcrops. Like Wookey Hole, its caves were used from at least the Bronze Age until Roman times.
- 7.5.8 The headwaters of the Axe supported a number of papermills from at least the eighteenth century and abandoned ponds and embankments are still a feature of the landscape. When the Hodgkinsons acquired the mill in the 1850s, they built both a new mill (now a visitors centre) and an estate village which still dominates the settlement. Their mock-Jacobean mansion, now a hotel, is short distance away at Glencott.

7.5.9 Wookey Hole caves are a major visitor attraction. For much of the year the well-contained visitor facilities and car parking can cope with the visitor pressure, but in the peak season there are significant pressures.

7.5.10 On the slopes above the caves there is evidence of old field systems and abandoned settlements, as well as briefly-active iron mines and a lime kiln. The grassland and woodland here is of significant nature conservation interest.

#### *The Wells Bowl*

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|------------------------|--|
| • Setting of Wells     | • Hamlets and small villages on slopes |
| • Bowl-shaped landform | • Some large fields                    |
| • Steep wooded combes  | • Variable hedges changing to          |
| • Parkland             | drystone walls at top                  |
| • Springs              | • Scattered hedgerow trees and         |
| • Deserted settlements | parkland planting                      |

7.5.11 From the wooded ridge of Milton Hill eastwards to the even more prominent flat-topped Kings Castle Ridge, the land around Wells slopes upwards to the Plateau as irregular infoldings and minor valleys, steepening towards the crest to form very steep, wooded combes like Biddlecombe. Springs emerge high up the slope below Pen Hill and at Walcombe. The availability of water, gentler gradients and southerly aspect have permitted the establishments of farmsteads and hamlets like that at Walcombe, where old field systems and earthworks indicate that the settlement was once probably larger. Certainly, deserted medieval

settlements like that at Milton indicate a pattern of more frequent settlement in the Middle Ages.

7.5.12 The parkland character of the land above Wells has arisen not only from Stoberry and Milton Parks, but also from the parkland trees around Walcombe, on the Mendip Hospital site and elsewhere. Moreover, on the upper slopes there is an attractive contrast between woodland in the combes and the large fields with scattered hedgerow trees where open sheep walks have been enclosed. To the west, the small villages of East and West Horrington are surrounded by patterns of fields which may indicate that they are planned settlements.

7.5.13 The Wells Bowl thus is an attractive mixture of landscape elements with a predominantly lush, well wooded character. It provides a setting for the much admired view of Wells, where, despite the post-war development radiating out along the main roads to the east and west, the historic core is still readily apparent. The cathedral, prebendal buildings and Bishop's Palace are within a largely parkland setting visible from the hills above, but it is the central tower of the cathedral and the equally fine tower of St Cuthbert's Church which give the views their unique qualities.