

# 16. Wandle River Valley



Key plan

## Description

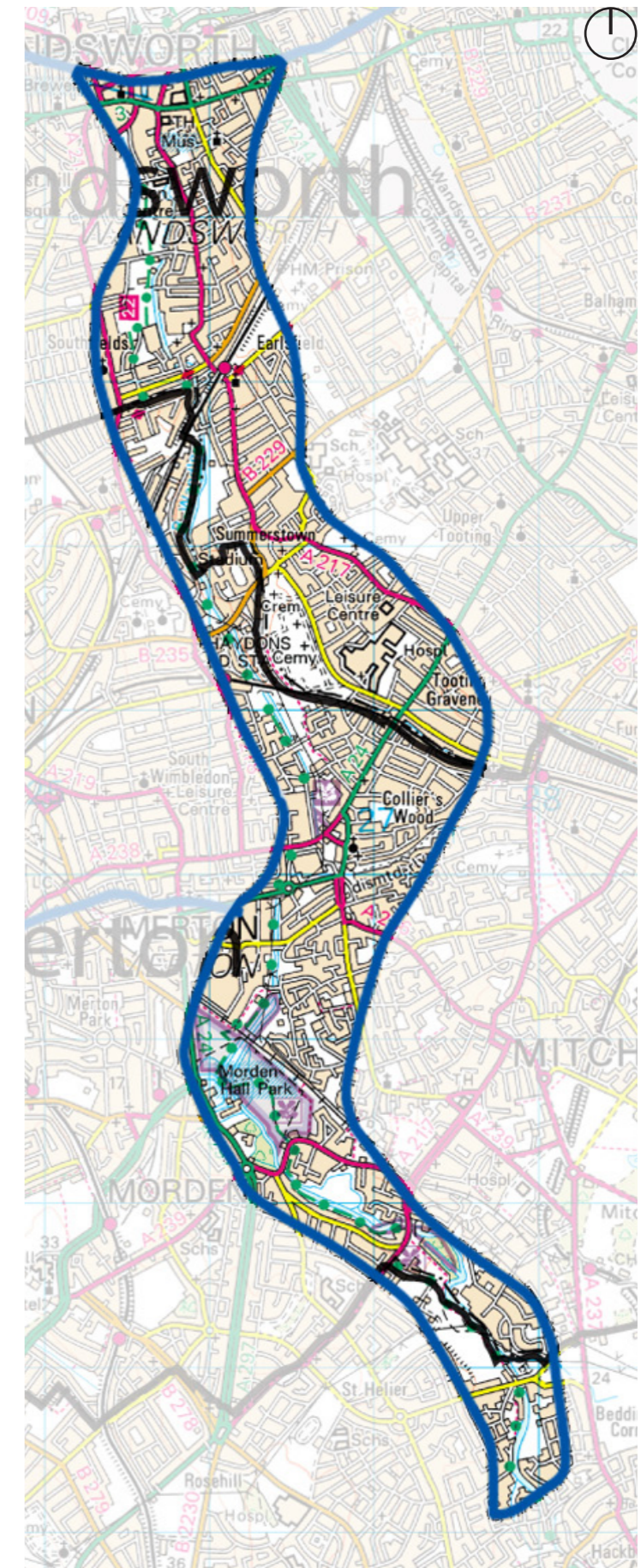
The River Wandle is a chalk river which emerges from a springline at the foot of the North Downs and flows due north to its confluence with the River Thames. The Wandle Valley Natural Landscape Area includes parts of the boroughs of Wandsworth, Merton and Sutton. The topography within the Landscape Area is relatively level: the shallow ridges that enclose the valley lie outside the Natural Landscape Area (see NLA 15 and NLA 17).

The bedrock throughout this area is London Clay, with alluvium deposits along the valley bottom and gravel formations on valley sides. The gravels were deposited as river terraces mainly in cold periods between about 350 000 and 70 000 years ago. There are also deposits of undifferentiated glacial till at South Wimbledon and on the valley sides at Earlsfield and Southfields. The soil throughout the valley is seasonally wet deep clay surrounded by seasonally wet deep loam.

The majority of the Wandle River is bordered by industrial developments and is crossed frequently by road and rail bridges. Long stretches of the river are channelled through revetment work. Historically the river was a focus for settlement and industry. Watermills along the river banks milled flour from locally grown wheat and the villages along the river prospered from their proximity to London and ample opportunities to supply and trade with the

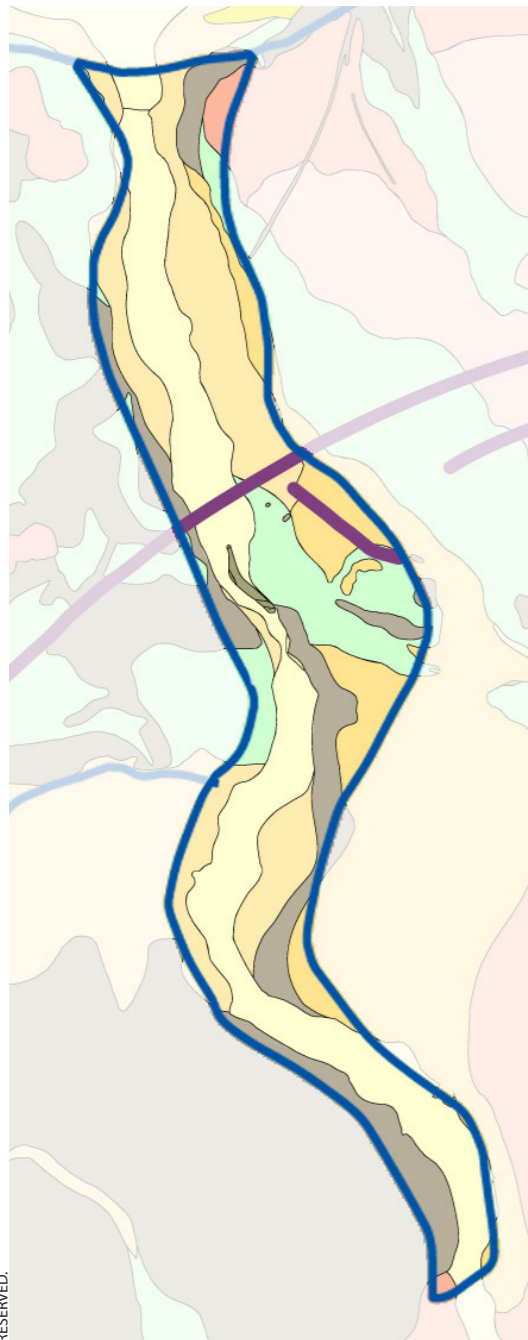
markets of the City. The mills continued to drive industrial growth through the 18th and 19th centuries, when the Wandle Valley was a centre for paper making, metal working, leather, textiles, gunpowder and oil mills. The growth of the railways led to a boom in housing development and a rapid transformation in the character of the river valley from rural to urban.

Most of the industrial developments are surrounded by Victorian terraces. There are also postwar tower block developments in Wandsworth and extensive residential developments. Many of the open spaces close to the river (the original bleaching and drying fields for the mills) have become industrial estates, but some riverside parklands associated with the grand 18th- and 19th-century houses of industrial entrepreneurs are now public open spaces. The remaining open spaces make up a fragmented corridor along the Wandle River. Most are maintained as amenity grassland at parks and recreation grounds, but there are small areas of semi-natural habitat: for instance patches of native woodland between the Mitcham industrial estate and Morden Hall, areas of reedbed at Morden Hall Park, and acidic grassland at Lambeth Cemetery.



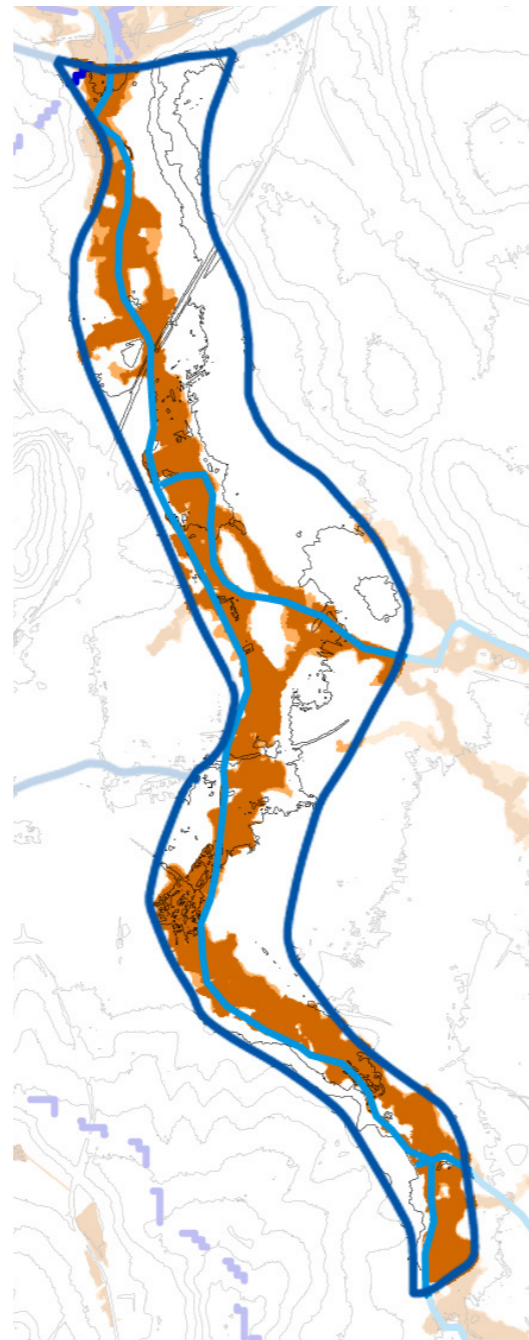
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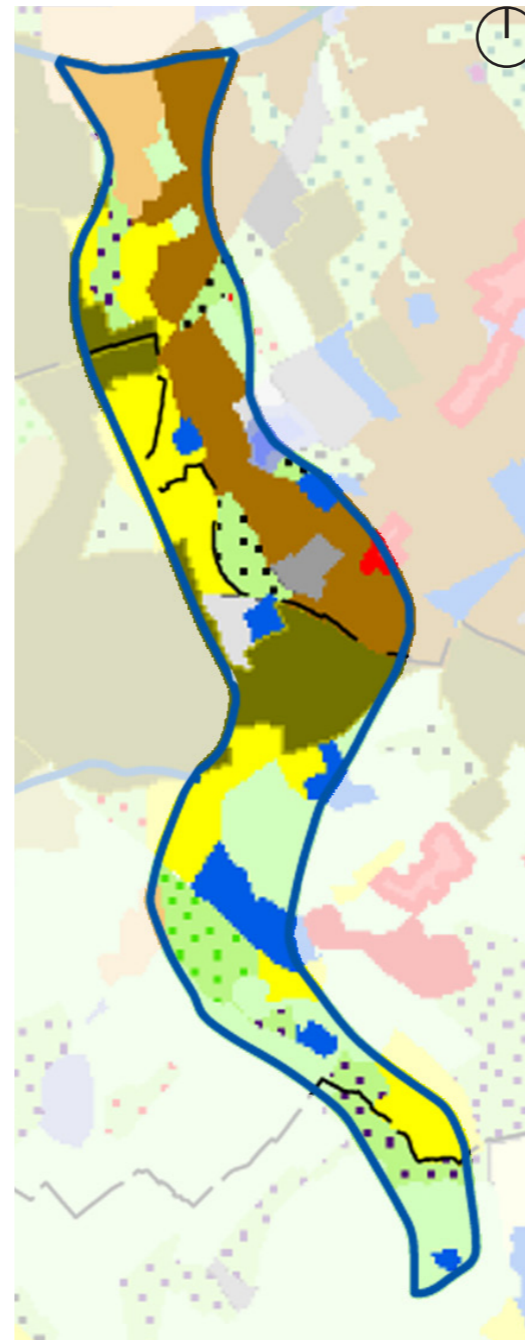
Geology

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: ENGLISH HERITAGE DATA



Rivers and Topography

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Historic Development

## Natural Signature and natural landscape features

**Natural Signature:**  
Wandle River Valley – Water meadows echoing the meandering course of the river, backed by sinuous bands of wet woodland.

The open spaces alongside the river have been ‘squeezed’ by urban development and there are very few places where a sense of the natural river, within its floodplain water meadow setting, remains intact. The natural signature of the river valley expresses the natural character of the meandering chalk river, which historically would have flowed within a narrow, intimate floodplain, with water meadows, ponds, oxbows and rush pastures grading to areas of drier meadow and woodland. There would have been patches of wet woodland in parts of the floodplain and the sinuous path of the river would have been marked by winding lines of trees. Elements of this pattern remain in open spaces along the river today.

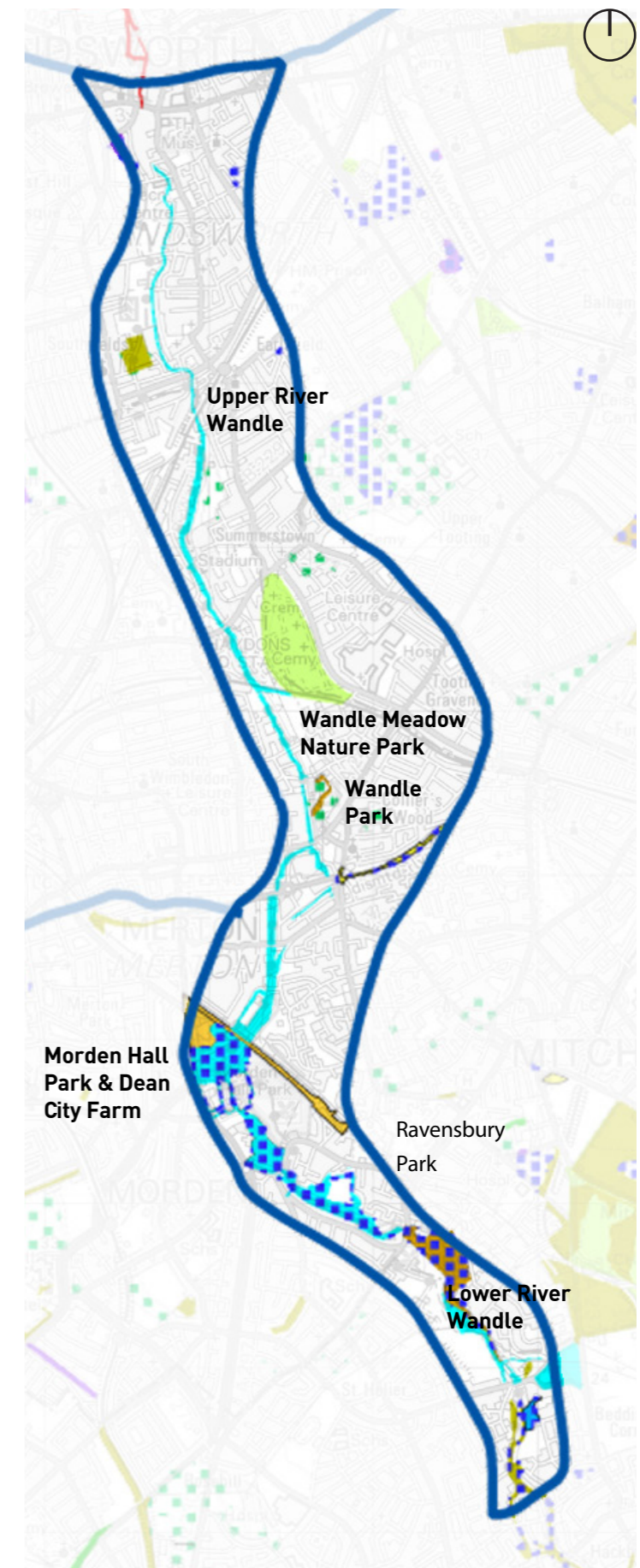
The River Wandle has long been a focus for settlement and industrial activity and the natural signature also includes bridges, riverside paths and river bank steps, as well as elements of industrial archaeology, such as mill traces, leats, ponds and moats.

Examples of natural landscape features within the Wandle River Valley Natural Landscape Area are:

- **Upper River Wandle** – Despite reductions in flow caused by water abstraction, the Wandle is still one of the finest chalk streams in London, and the river supports an exceptionally diverse aquatic flora. The river has natural banks for some of its length and here it supports abundant and diverse marginal vegetation. This often extends into various associated wetland sites situated alongside the river, sometimes developed on disused watercress beds. Other uncommon plants include ragged-robin, marsh-marigold, sharp-flowered rush and water chickweed. There is a large and diverse fish community, which includes dace, chub and bullhead. Breeding birds include kingfisher, grey wagtail and reed warbler and wetland invertebrates include several nationally rare moths. Small areas of wet woodland also occur beside the river and on islands. The Upper River Wandle includes four Local Nature Reserves: Wilderness Island, Bennett’s Hole, Spencer Road Wetland and Ravensbury Park.

- **Lower River Wandle** – Downstream of the Wandle River Nature Park the banks of the Wandle are well wooded, with some wetland influence close to the river especially north of Plough Lane. Upstream of Wandle Park the interest on the banks is more limited, as the adjacent open space is narrow and dry. Tributary streams such as Bunce’s Ditch have been landscaped in conjunction with new housing developments. One of these – Pickle Ditch – is the sole remnant of the original course of the Wandle along this entire length in Merton, the other channels being the result of straightening and mill race construction dating back more than 300 years.
- **Wandle Meadow Nature Park** – The only sizeable area with wetlands beside the river is at Wandle Meadow Nature Park (a Local Nature Reserve). This valuable informal park was developed on the site of an old sewage treatment works. It includes temporary water bodies, wet grassland and wet woodland, drier grassland developing over the old concrete surfaces, and scrub and woodland on debris mounds and beside the river. It is an excellent place to see wetland plants and animals, including some which are otherwise uncommon in the vicinity. The drier grasslands support a rich flora and are colourful in the spring and early summer.

- **Wandle Park** – Wandle Park in Colliers Wood was formerly the site of Wandle Park House, built about 1791. The house was demolished in 1962. Before it was straightened, the River Wandle used to flow through the park, but after that the old course was left as an arm of the river, which subsequently dried up. It has now been restored and water once more flows south to north diagonally across the park from its southern corner. A new reedbed has been developed to enhance the quality of the water.
- **Morden Hall Park & Deen City Farm** – One of the National Trust’s few urban parks, Morden Hall Park spans the River Wandle, which is divided here into a network of mill leats, moats and other channels. Alongside there are meadows, marsh, wet woodland and parkland trees with a variety of aquatic flora and fauna. An area beside the Wandle is kept wet and supports a valuable stand of sedge and wet grassland, a remnant of the original floodplain habitat. The wetlands support breeding kingfisher, grey wagtail, reed bunting and water rail. Away from the river, the value lies in the old trees and the meadows, now managed for their traditional wildflowers, which attract butterflies in the summer. The best meadows are on the old river terrace in the east of the park, including the former medieval open West Field of Mitcham, the ridges and furrows of which can still be seen.



Natural Habitats & Landscape Key Features

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## Underlining the natural signature of the Wandle River Valley

### Key influences

- Meandering river channel, picked out by sinuous lines of trees – willow, poplar and alder.
- Pollarded willow trees.
- Water meadows with traces of former river channels, ponds and wet flushes.
- Ditches bordered by rush and sedge pastures.
- Ridge and furrow.
- Small copses of wet woodland.
- Industrial archaeology – mill traces, ponds, mill leats and moats.
- Intimate narrow floodplain.

### Design clues

Ideas for place making and shaping future design decisions - how the Natural Signatures for each natural landscape area might be expressed within the wider public realm, through new development and landscape management projects.

- Sinuous forms – expressed in pathways, hedgerows, lines of trees and bands of woodland.
- Curving swales lined with reeds and wider flood attenuation areas, which have extensive damp meadows, with deeper curving wetland scrapes, perhaps suggesting the meandering form of a former river channel.
- ‘Natural’ flood defences with broad, sculpted embankments defining a linear riverside park which is designed to flood.
- Linear, sinuous bands of meadow sedge or rushes, enclosed by broad curving embanked pathways.
- Winding lines of trees, particularly willow and poplar.
- Play areas with a riverside theme using motifs such as eels, fish, dragonflies, bridges and stepping stones.
- Bespoke signage, benches, paving patterns and boundaries, designed in association with local artists and school children, to express the natural signature of the Wandle Valley within the wider public realm, neighbouring schools and housing areas.
- Make connections between fragmented open spaces (even if these are incidental spaces and focal points within the wider public realm), linking them back to paths and spaces along the River Wandle.

## Wandle River Valley – Key environmental assets

Environmental Asset	Relevant borough	Notes
<b>Upper River Wandle</b>	Merton, Sutton	Chalk stream; exceptionally diverse flora with natural banks for much of its course; small areas of wet woodlands.
<b>Lower River Wandle</b>	Merton	Chalk stream; predominantly bordered by amenity grass or industrial developments.
<b>Wandle Meadow Nature Park</b>	Merton	Sizeable wetlands developed on site of old sewage works.
Ravensbury Park	Merton	Seasonally flooded grassland, managed for conservation.
<b>Wandle Park</b>	Merton	Recently restored gravel-bottomed stream flows through.
<b>Morden Hall Park &amp; Deen City Farm</b>	Merton	National Trust park; network of mill leat, moats and channels; adjacent marsh and wet woodlands.
Streatham Cemetery (part of cemetery within Area)	Wandsworth but owned and managed by Lambeth	Infrequently mown neutral grassland with a wide range of herbs and grasses.
Lambeth Cemetery	Wandsworth but owned and managed by Lambeth	Predominately neutral grassland; contains important habitats and landscape features.