

London's Natural Signatures: The London Landscape Framework Prepared for Natural England January 2011



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London's Natural Signatures: The London Landscape Framework – Executive Summary

Introduction

The London Landscape Framework aims to support but also go beyond existing green space policy. This is not to suggest that London's landscapes have been neglected. The protection of London's green spaces goes back as far as the late nineteenth century, with the formation of the commons Preservation Society in 1865, and over the twentieth century and into the twenty-first steps have continued to be taken to assess, protect and manage London's green spaces. These measures range from the designation of London's Green Belt in 1947 to the proliferation of strategies and frameworks in recent years, which include the London Plan, the East London Green Grid and the Green Arc as well as focused strategies such as the Thames Landscape Strategy and those for the Wandle and Lea River Valleys. Local borough policies also incorporate green space and biodiversity plans. Nevertheless, none of these strategies aim specifically to reconnect Londoners with the underlying nature of the city. Largely perceived as amenities, London's green spaces are not always recognised for what they tell us about the land upon which London is built, nor does current policy aim to redress the skewed perception of London as an intensely built up city. Currently London's natural landscapes, whilst well-known, well-loved and well-used, are not always perceived as integral to London's character, and are often enjoyed without any real knowledge of their specific relationship to the city in which they sit. This focus on use value also inadvertently neglects those remnants of the natural landscape which are not so obviously amenable to leisure uses. This study aims to set straight these imbalances.



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The 22 Natural Landscape Areas

The Natural Landscape Areas and their Natural Signatures

- 1 Colne River Valley** – Fast-flowing, clean river set within floodplain meadows bordered by damp woodland
- 2 Ruislip Plateau** – Field hedgerows dotted with oaks, and bluebells beneath hornbeam coppice echoing the ancient trees of Ruislip Woods
- 3 Barnet Plateau** – Long views from remnant heathy commons
- 4 Finchley Ridge** – Ridgetop blocks of ancient woodland on former common land
- 5 Hampstead Ridge** – A mosaic of ancient woodland, scrub and acid grassland along ridgetop summits with panoramic views
- 6 Lea River Valley** – Tributary streams flowing across wide open marshes to join the River Lea and its sequence of reservoirs
- 7 Essex Plateau** – Mosaics of ancient woodland, wood pasture and acid grassland within the former royal hunting 'forests' at Epping Forest and Havering
- 8 Roding River Valley** – The narrow, sinuous course of the upper Roding where the riverbanks are lined with willows
- 9 North Thames Terraces** – Flat, open grassland, stepping up from the Thames, with narrow sinuous strips of woodland marking the alignment of tributary creeks
- 10 Hayes Gravels** – Small-scale, enclosed landscape of meadows bordered by tall hedgerows, with woodlands, copses and hedgerow trees
- 11 Brent River Valley** – Meandering, shallow river bordered by diverse floodplain meadows and winding strips of damp woodland
- 12 Hounslow Gravels** – A flat large-scale mosaic of heathy grassland, scrub and secondary woodland, traversed by narrow, lush stream corridors
- 13 Upper Thames** – The meandering River Thames, together with the transitional mudflats, shingle beaches, islands and flood meadows alongside
- 14 Lower Thames Floodplain** – A vast, flat riverside zone of grazed saltmarshes grading to reedswamp, mudflats and the wide tidal Thames – the most striking and immediately visible natural element in London
- 15 South Thames Heaths and Commons** – Mosaic of heathland, grassland and ancient wood pasture with groups of veteran trees
- 16 Wandle River Valley** – Water meadows echoing the meandering course of the river, backed by sinuous bands of wet woodland
- 17 South London Clays and Gravels** – Small hedged meadows and large heathy commons set against a backdrop of extensive woodlands on higher land
- 18 Ravensbourne River Valley** – A network of small rivers, bounded by gravel terraces, which flow through water meadows and tidal flood meadows before reaching the Thames as a navigable channel, bordered by working wharves
- 19 South London Pebbly Sands** – Historic heathy commons and extensive woodland on elevated land with views over the Thames Basin from ridgetops and summits
- 20 Cray River Valley** – Chalk river with a natural profile which flows through a sequence of floodplain meadows and wet woodlands
- 21 Lower North Downs Dip Slope** – A diverse landscape with a transition from heath, scrub and woodland on the lower slopes to more open farmland and scattered ancient woodlands on the rising chalklands to the south
- 22 Upper North Downs Dip Slope** – Ancient woodland and chalk grassland on steep valley slopes emphasise the striking, sculpted chalkland relief

Methodology

Our methodology combines elements of Landscape Character Assessment and Historic Landscape Characterisation to create a bespoke approach in direct response to the unique circumstances of London's Natural Landscapes.¹ It is not a classic landscape character assessment but rather a desk study that forms a framework for further research and consultation, including, most crucially, that on perceptions of the landscape.

In producing this framework we have limited ourselves initially to wholly objective data – solid and drift geology, topography, soils data and habitat. This provides a firm foundation on which to overlay issues of perception. Having overlaid this data as a series of GIS layers, we have divided London into Landscape Types, groups of areas of land which share common physical characteristics. The 22 individual areas within these groups form the Natural Landscape Areas which are the focus of this framework. A map of the types and areas is shown on pages 31 and 32.

Within each of these, we first note the major natural landscape features, some of which will be familiar to the boroughs in which they lie, whilst others may have been overlooked as insignificant due to differing criteria for judging value. We then focus more specifically on those which most clearly embody the overarching quality of the Natural Landscape Areas. Notably, the Natural Landscape Areas cut across borough boundaries, revealing their artificiality – for this reason we have also listed the relevant boroughs in the accompanying tables. This also means that the Natural Landscape Areas provide a possible mechanism for enabling boroughs to work together across these boundaries.

1. See *Landscape Character Assessment: Guidance for England and Scotland, Topic Paper 5: Understanding Historic Landscape Character* (EH, The Countryside Agency, Historic Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage) for an exploration of the relationship between these methods.

The concept of the Natural Signature

The most important concept behind, and output of, this study is the Natural Signatures. Since a lack of widespread awareness of the underlying nature of London has been a major cause of the gradual erosion of London's natural character – through for example the culverting and canalising of rivers and the felling of native woodlands – as well as of the neglect of those remnants of natural landscapes which appear to have no obvious amenity value, there is a clear demand for a succinct and evocative way of distilling and expressing this essence. The Natural Signatures are a means of encapsulating and evoking the key natural characteristics of the Natural Landscape Areas. Just as the signature is the expression of the individual, so uniquely recognisable that it holds enormous legal power, so too the Natural Signatures are intended to be unique, recognisable and powerfully symbolic.

The natural and the built in London

Just as important as raising awareness of the Natural Signatures for each Natural Landscape Area is the need to reconnect the natural and built environments in the public imagination. Policies such as the designation of the Green Belt, largely a positive move, have nevertheless exacerbated the perceived opposition between built and natural. Yet London's underlying nature and the way in which it has developed from its origins are inextricably linked, and whilst we begin with purely natural data, this study also reveals how the geology and topography of London explains to a surprising degree the history of built London. Perhaps the clearest example of this symbiotic relationship between built and natural is the location and development of the City of London at the point of the River Thames



The London Wetland Centre: reflecting the Natural Signature

where a number of gravel islands produced a ford, and where the River comes closest to the edge of the gravel terraces on the northern side. Likewise, at least until the rapid expansion of the suburbs in the interwar period, housing developments grew up largely on the areas of ground – mostly gravel – which were most suitable for building. Throughout the Georgian and Victorian expansions of London, they also drew directly in their building materials from the ground on which they stood. The prevalence of London stock brick, formed of London clay and brickearths, is a vivid reminder of the very close relationship between London's built form and its underlying natural character. In turn, the remnants of London's landscapes which still exist do so because of the way that London has been built up around them.

Defining 'natural landscape' in the London context

In addition, this mutual intertwining of natural environment and human intervention means that no landscapes that exist today can truly be called natural. Indeed, some of the green spaces held most dearly by Londoners are often the least natural of all, with some of the Royal Parks being landscaped and manicured and some commons offering mainly amenity grass, although there are notable exceptions. Where natural characteristics remain, significant erosion has still occurred – this report considers the ways in which this has happened, from the culverting of rivers to the blocking of views of London's surprisingly rich topography by extensive built development.

However, some semi-natural remnants do remain closer than others to their original condition. For the purposes of this Framework we have defined a natural landscape as one which:

- is an original watercourse or
- contains vegetation typical of the soils and geology of its area and/or
- allows an appreciation of the wider geomorphology and natural topography of London.

Protecting and enhancing London's natural landscapes

It will be clear from the above definition that many of these spaces do not necessarily enjoy protection under existing legislation. Furthermore whilst the St Paul's Viewing Corridors and London's Strategic Views offer protection for key views, the emphasis is firmly on the built, rather than natural, environment. Where a view of the topography of London is protected, as at Primrose Hill, this is mere coincidence; it has been designated because of the presence in the view of St. Paul's Cathedral, rather than on account of its view of the topography. One of our aims is to ensure similar care is extended to those remnant landscapes that are currently neglected – both in terms of views and of the land itself. However, we also aim to go beyond conventional protection and management measures. The Natural Signatures, in particular, promote the articulation and extension of the key characteristics across new development. At present, landscaping is often undertaken with little or no attention to the natural context.

Just as built developments are now expected to be designed with close attention to the surrounding architectural context, we want landscape design to be undertaken in such a way as to enhance and articulate the key characteristics of the Natural Signatures. The Design Clues provided in this report are intended to point the way to a more contextual approach, though it is clear that these may be more difficult to implement in the more built up Natural Landscape Areas.

Conclusion and vision

Above all this Framework is intended to re-establish the relationship between the built and the natural aspects of London, and to restore a balance by which the natural context is considered as crucial as the built context for considerations about London's future. It is intended to sit alongside, to enhance and to extend existing policy; we also hope it contributes to enhancing and extending our ways of thinking about London's natural landscapes.

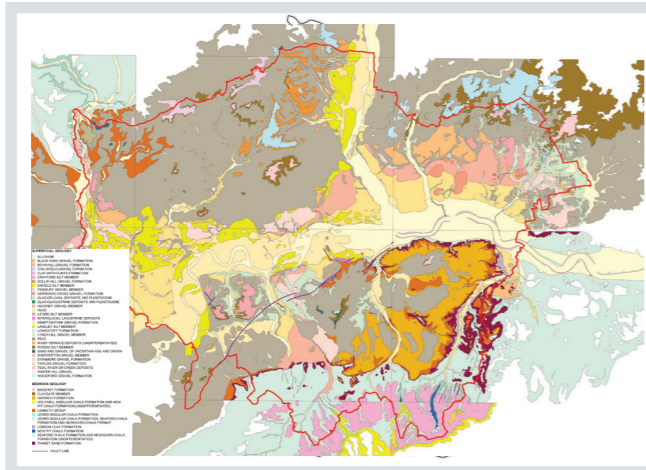
The Vision:

The rich variety of London's natural landscapes – their 'Natural Signatures' - should be embedded into perceptions of and decisions about London such that they may contribute to reinforcing a sense of local identity and distinctiveness throughout London.

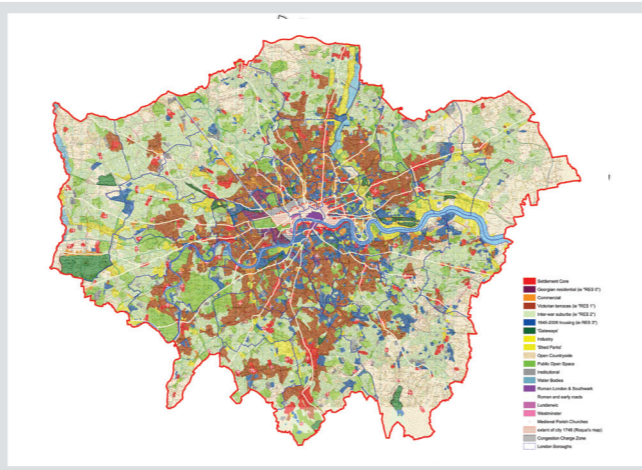
This should be achieved by:

- raising public awareness of the diversity of London's natural landscape to enable Londoners to reconnect with the natural character of London;
- ensuring that existing areas are managed/enhanced to reinforce their Natural Signatures;
- ensuring that new development works with, rather than against, London's natural character by taking explicit account of the area's natural, as much as built, context; and
- identifying and protecting views of and from key landscapes.

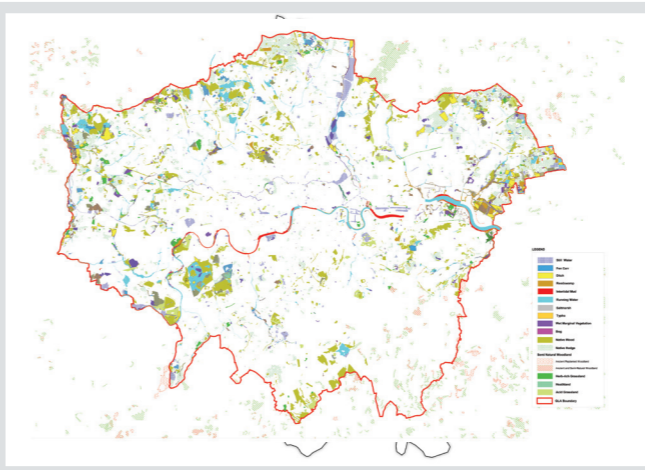
Data sets



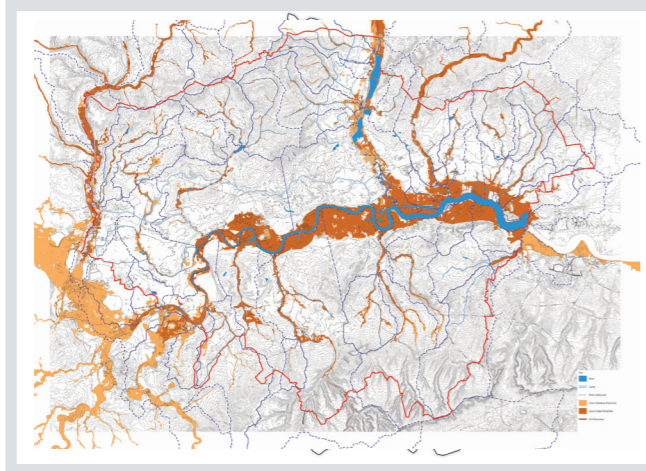
Greater London – Bedrock and superficial geology



Greater London – London's Historic Development (English Heritage Rapid Characterisation)



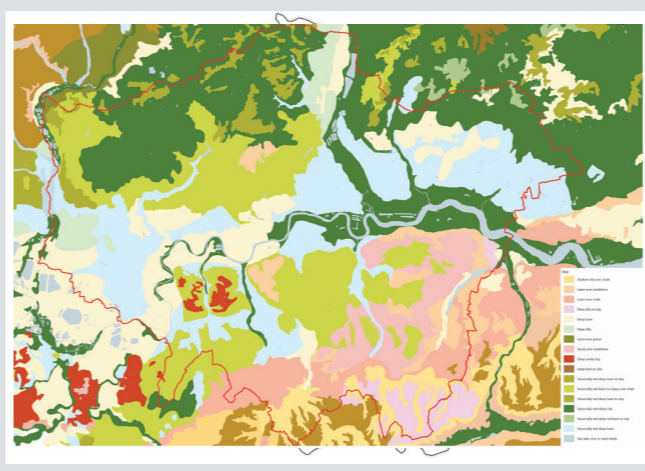
Greater London – Natural Habitats



Greater London – Topography, Rivers and Floodplains



Greater London Borough Boundaries



Greater London – Soil Types

FOR CREDITS SEE PAGES 26-41



View over London from Richmond Hill