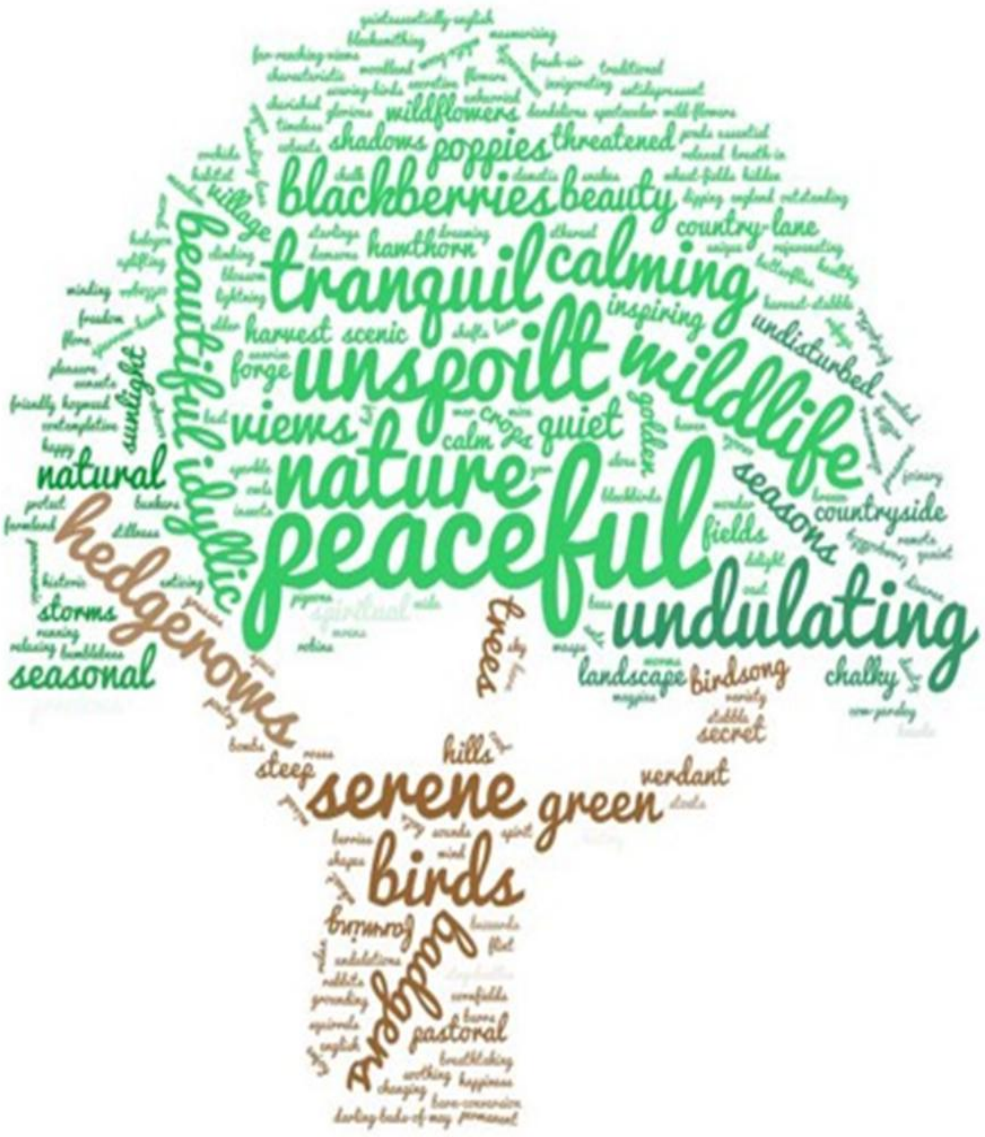
The Austin Lodge Valley, Eynsford

an Appreciation



A note by Friends of the Austin Lodge Valley,
for all who would like to know more about this lovely place.

November 2016

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Contents

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especially Annabel for the word clouds, Isabel, Alex and Hannah for fieldwork and drafting,
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with their words about the valley.

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"With the exception of love, there is nothing else by which people of all kinds are more united than by their pleasure in a good view".
Kenneth Clark, quoted in Simon Jenkins,
England's 100 Best Views, 2013.

1 Views of the Austin Lodge Valley

Introduction

This report is about the Austin Lodge Valley, a small but exceptionally beautiful valley running into that of the River Darent. It is cut off from the A225 road by the railway line from Sevenoaks to Swanley, and many people passing along the road will not know it is there. Two sites have been suggested as suitable for housing in the Austin Lodge Valley, just at the point where its beauty makes its first impression on the walker, cyclist or motorist.

Written, illustrated and produced by people who love the valley, this evidence-based report is not a protest against the suggested housing development, although it is opposed by a large number of people in Eynsford and beyond. Instead, it aims to show why the Austin Lodge Valley is special among other landscapes in the area, and why it should be protected in its present form for the enjoyment of generations to come.

Viewing the Austin Lodge Valley

The best way to come upon the Austin Lodge Valley is on foot, either via the footpath that leads through the little wood almost opposite Eynsford station, or along the Lower Austin Lodge Road which is reached by turning right, out of the station.

Taking the first way, after one hundred yards in the shade of trees re-generated following the storm of 1987, you will emerge into the light and see the path stretching before you along the gentle eastern slope of the valley.

In the middle distance before you are Chalkhurst Wood and an ancient hedgerow with a mix of berry-bearing trees (Photo 1).

Photo 1 Austin Lodge Valley east side looking south

Beyond this hedge and at right angles to it, is a remnant of a far older hedgerow made up of small trees and shrubs and a number of yew trees. There is one house, the Edwardian 'Chalkhurst' in the valley bottom, although for most of the year this is hidden from view by tall trees. On the horizon, framing the view, is an extension of Chalkhurst Wood called Hartnips Wood. All these elements, slopes, fields, hedgerows, hidden house and woods make for a remarkable and pleasing landscape composition.

Approaching the valley the second way by the single track Lower Austin Lodge Road, you do not get the wide landscape surprise as you do when emerging by the path through the wood. Instead, there are glimpses of the more dramatic west side of the valley through one or two gaps in the hedge which hides the full view from sight (Photo 2). This side sweeps steeply upwards to the right and in front of you. Here the 'The Birches' ridge is more densely wooded and before you, the smaller fields on the valley side have mature trees within the hedgerow boundaries. Behind you, the wooded railway embankment closes the valley off from the busy A225 as if hiding its secret beyond.

Photo 2 Austin Lodge Valley west side looking south

Along the road, this classic Kentish downland valley continues onward for a mile or more. As the road rises and falls and turns, different versions of the same basic views to the west and east come alternately into sight, each view a pleasure in its own right. Above it all is a huge expanse of sky, generally with an ever changing cloudscape brought in by winds from the west. It is no wonder that a book of walks around London has described this place as 'a delectable lost valley'.

The Planner's View

In 2003, a planning application was made to Sevenoaks District Council (SDC) for a sizeable barn to be erected at Upper Austin Lodge Farm about a mile from the Eynsford end of the valley, on the site of existing agricultural buildings. The application was recommended for refusal by Eynsford Parish Council and turned down by the SDC planners. What is noteworthy from the refusal document are the circumstances of the refusal and the words used in giving the reasons.

Ordinarily, the replacement of a building used for agricultural activities by another to be used for the same purposes, would be looked upon favourably. If there is an agricultural need for a building, even on Green Belt land which this is, it is deemed to be 'appropriate development'. In this case the building was not only in Green Belt but also in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and in a Special Landscape Area (SLA). Justifying the decision to refuse permission the document says:

"The AONB status of this area is official recognition of the character of the landscape, but the beauty and tranquillity of this valley are, in my opinion, truly exceptional and the [Eynsford] Parish Council's description of the valley as 'spectacular' is in my view an apt one. The photographs do not do justice to this beauty and the way in which the landscape is both open due to a lack of buildings and boundaries, and yet enclosed due to the rising slopes on either side of the road" (SE/03/00714 Item 1.5 paragraph 3.6),

and so, the document continues,

"*Reluctantly, I must conclude that the harm to the character of the landscape within this AONB and SLA is overriding and in this case the agricultural need is outweighed."*
(paragraph 4.1).

What is important here is not only the words used to describe the character of the landscape: 'beautiful',' tranquil', 'exceptional' and 'spectacular', but the fact that the references are to the *whole* of the valley and not just the place most immediately affected by development. It is the 'wholeness' of the beauty of the Austin Lodge Valley that makes it so special.

So how did this all come about?

"The language of landscape begins in geology".
Simon Jenkins, England's 100 Best Views, 2013.

2 Foundations: Geology and Soils

Introduction

It may not seem so as you take in the landscape of the Austin Lodge Valley, but on a global scale, you are in a rare environment. The bedrock of the valley is chalk, just a metre or so beneath your feet in most places. Chalk comes to the surface in only a few places in the world. Most is found in south eastern England, northern France (where it is part of the same geological formation as the Weald of Kent and Sussex) and in parts of Germany, Holland and Denmark. Chalk is also found in the Great Plains of the USA in Kansas and Texas.

Given the relative rarity of chalk at the Earth's surface, it is not surprising that the landforms and landscapes typically associated with chalk are also rare. When we think of chalk landscapes, we probably think of the open, gently rolling grassy downlands of Kent, Sussex and Hampshire, which hold their own with the Yorkshire Dales and the Lake District as iconic English landscape types. The smaller-scale features of chalk landscapes are equally interesting, particularly the dry valleys of the North and South Downs.

Chalk and Soil

'Chalk' is the name given by geologists to a sequence of layers of rock, most of which were laid down in the deep, warm seas of the Cretaceous Period which lasted for between 150 and 65 million years. Chalk is a soft, porous limestone consisting of billions upon billions of skeletal platelets of microscopic creatures called *coccoliths*, mixed with *calcium carbonate*, originally formed in sandy mud. These minute creatures lived in the upper part of the Cretaceous seas. As they died they sank to the sea bed, where the accumulated pressure of more and more platelets and more sandy mud above, eventually became chalk rock.

Chalk used to be classified by geologists into three types: Lower, Middle and Upper. The chalk of the Austin Lodge Valley is of the 'Upper' or most recent kind. Geologists now classify chalk on the basis of colour, *white chalk* and *grey chalk*. Grey chalk or 'marly chalk' was formed earlier and contains fossils such as ammonites and bellemnites. The chalk of the Austin Lodge Valley is white chalk, which was formed later in shallow, clearer seas, with little sediment coming off the land. Hence it is a more pure form of chalk, and fossils are much rarer. Within the chalk, flint (a form of silica the origins of which are still not certain) occurs in occasional bands and appears on the surface of ridges as 'clay-with-flints' (Figure 1).

Chalk soils, sometimes called 'rendzinas', are generally thin, alkaline or lime-rich and very free draining. The soils of the Austin Lodge Valley bottom consist of a fine grey or brown clay with chalk and some flint rubble. They are the result of weathering processes operating about five million years ago, including 'frost heave', the splintering of chalk and flint by ice, and the chemical leaching of carbon by rain and surface water.

Draining as freely as it does, chalk is vulnerable to nitrate leaching and this, combined with lack of soil moisture, can be a limitation on crop yields.

Nevertheless much of the Austin Lodge Valley is classified as 'moderately good' (Grade 3) agricultural land, as in the wider, more open arable area between Lower Austin Lodge Farm and Eynsford village which has been in continuous cultivation for possibly hundreds of years.

The Austin Lodge Dry Valley

The origins of the Austin Lodge Valley lie in the Pleistocene geological period of 2.6 million to 12,000 years ago, which included several *glaciations* of north west Europe, which lasted from 120,000 to 12,000 years.

The valley was formed towards the end of the most recent of these glacial periods. Southern Britain was not covered by the ice sheets which lay to the north, but the intense cold meant that the moisture within the chalk was permanently frozen, forming an impermeable layer called 'permafrost'. The impermeability of the chalk meant that during short periods of surface thaw, streams formed along a depression or fault line on the chalk surface. When the ice of the permafrost eventually melted, streams and rivers disappeared into the fissures in the chalk and the valley in which they previously flowed became 'dry'.

Some chalk dry valleys such as the Devil's Dyke near Brighton and the Devil's Kneading Trough near Wye, Kent are spectacular: short, steep and deep. The Austin Lodge Valley is not spectacular in this way. Instead, it is long and relatively narrow with woods along nearly all its skyline, changing views, and a long agricultural history.

The Austin Lodge Valley is just over 4.5 km long from Highfield Wood south of Magpie Bottom, to the point where the Austin Lodge Road meets Station Road, Eynsford (Map 1). Beyond the railway viaduct, the valley probably continued northwards until it met the River Darent. At its broadest, between Chalkhurst Wood and the Birches, the valley is 1.2 km wide whilst at its narrowest, just above Magpie Bottom, it is only around 100 m wide.

Using, as a rough guide, the 150m OS contour and the mid-line of the ancient woodland on the valley-side ridges as a means of definition, the overall shape and form of the valley becomes clearer (Map 1). Combining landscape, aspect and ecology, the valley can then be divided into three parts.

At its head in the south, there is the complex of small, very steeply sided 'feeder' valleys south of Magpie Bottom, which include the magnificent, orchid-strewn pastures managed by Kent Wildlife Trust, and the two small valleys headed by Dunstall Farm and Dunstall Priory. Moving north, there is the mixed area of arable land and rougher pasture land around Upper Austin Lodge Farm, and between the wooded slopes of Golden Hill, Round Hill and Lower, Middle and Upper Woods. This area includes the Upper Austin Lodge Golf Course, much of which is now reverting to nature, though some is being re-claimed for various purposes. Finally, there is the wider, more open, mainly arable area between Lower Austin Lodge Farm and Eynsford village, rising steeply to 'The Birches' ridge-top wood to the west.

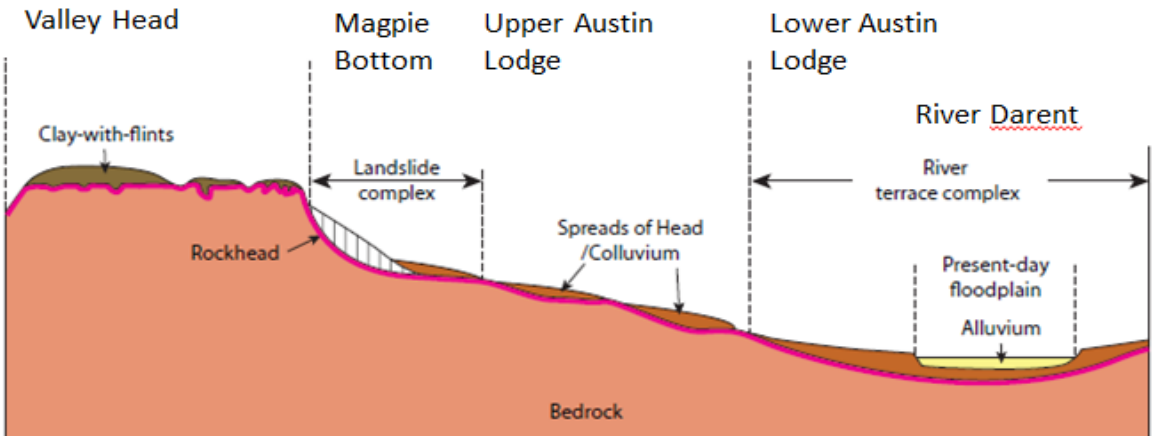
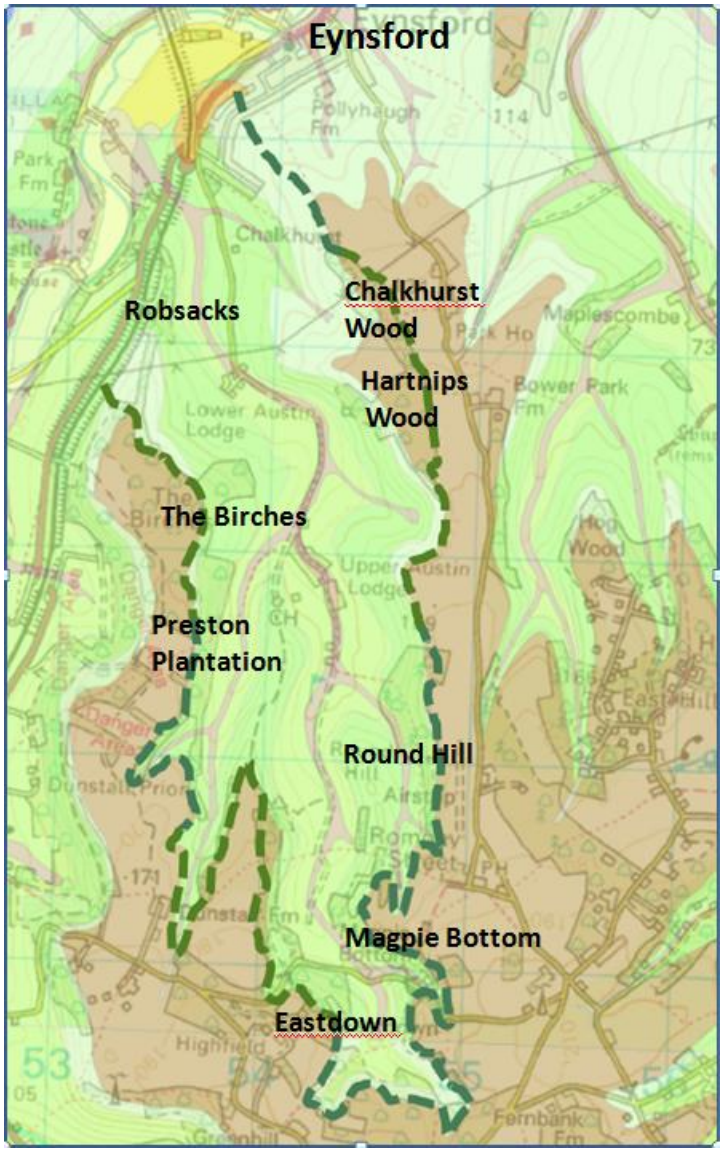


Figure 1 A cross-section similar to the Austin Lodge Valley (not to scale)



Map 1 The Austin Lodge Valley Defined

"The principal interest of this site is the chalk grassland on the steep slopes which supports a herb-rich plant community. The site also incorporates neutral grassland, scrub and a variety of woodland".
Kent Wildlife Trust on Site SE05.

3 Ecology: Flora and Fauna

Introduction

The Austin Lodge Valley is a part of the Central North Downs Biodiversity Opportunity Area (BOA), identified by Kent County Council as an area where "... the greatest gains can be made from habitat enhancement, restoration and recreation ... [and which] ... offer the best opportunities for establishing large habitat areas and/or networks of wildlife habitats."

The valley also contains two designated habitats of national or county-wide importance. One is the Magpie Bottom Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) which consists of five areas, totalling just over 50 hectares, identified for the presence *of lowland calcareous (chalky) grassland* and *broadleaved mixed and yew woodland*. Magpie Bottom features in a 2015 BBC film celebrating the work of John and Annette Bovington, who saved hundreds of species of plants from ploughing, including 9 types of orchids.

Magpie Bottom SSSI is now managed by Kent Wildlife Trust, which has also designated just over 30 hectares of the valley as a *Local Wildlife Site*. This includes the hedge along Footpath 199 behind Eynsford Rise, Chalkhurst Wood, Hartnips Wood and the hedges and shaws to the south of these, as well as part of Preston Hill Plantation and the Birches on the south west side of the valley.

Ancient Woodland

Both the Chalkhurst/Hartnips Woods and the Birches/Preston Hill sites, on the deeper, clay-with-flints soils of the valley ridges, are officially designated as *ancient woodland*. Ancient woodland is defined as an area that has been continuously wooded since 1600, and is identified from historical maps and documents and field surveys. Because they have remained undisturbed for perhaps hundreds of years, ancient woodlands have evolved into complex eco-systems of trees, plants, small mammals and birds, fungi and insects.

Ancient woodland need not have any very old trees, but it must have been wooded with natural re-growth or plantation trees for over c. 450 years. Chalkhurst/Hartnips is a classic 'coppiced' wood where trees, especially ash and hazel, have been continuously cut to near ground level, to provide wood for fuel and fencing. Interspersed with the 'pollards' are 'standard' trees, such as ash, pedunculate oak and beech, which provide wood for timber.

Other trees present which are indicative of ancient woodland, are the midland hawthorn on the clay soils and the spurge laurel on chalkier soils. There is the occasional wild cherry, reaching high to get to the light. Lower Wood to the south east of Upper Austin Lodge Farm contains, on a narrow chalky bank, an important stand of yew trees mixed with beech. Isolated yew trees are also found in some of the remaining field boundaries of the valley.

Flora of Wood and Grassland

From April onwards, the floors of the coppiced Chalkhurst and Hartnips Woods are dominated by the common bluebell – the deep blue native *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* – which makes a gorgeous and much visited showing. Other woodland plants found here are the wood anemone, the pignut (a perennial herb), the goldilocks buttercup and yellow archangel. In Lower Wood there may occasionally be found two plants that are very rare in Kent, namely, the yellow birds'-nest and bird's-nest orchids. These plants are unusual, in that they get their nourishment from decaying plant matter and contain no chlorophyll.

Chalkhurst, a mixed deciduous wood

It is however, the chalky grassland in the valley that produces the widest range of the most beautiful plants, especially where grasses have not become rank, and so permit the tiny seeds shed by established plants to reach the soil. Within and around the Magpie Bottom SSSI is an extraordinary range of *orchids*, with beautiful names such as Pyramidal Orchid, Man Orchid, Fly Orchid, Bee Orchid and Spider Orchid.

Bee Orchid

Areas with deeper soils, such as on the sides of Round Hill, support Upright Brome, Greater Knapweed, Wild Marjoram, Cowslip and Adder's Tongue. Lower slopes with thinner soils are equally rich, in plants such as Quaking Grass, Sheep's Fescue, Burnet Saxifrage and Wild Thyme. Further down, but generally still on sloping ground, are declining meadow plants such as Bush Vetch, Bird's Foot Trefoil and Common Knapweed.

Cowslip

An encouraging feature of the valley is the amount of re-generation and replanting of native trees and shrubs which is taking place. This can be seen especially along the road leading to the (now disused) golf course and the small shaw near Eynsford station, cleared of its mature beech trees by the Great Storm of 1987. Furthermore, the turning over of some parts of the fairways of the golf course to paddocks and mowing offers the possibility of the re-instatement of even more wildflower species. The redundant bunkers with their wetter, sandy soils are already sprouting some exotic plant species sprouted from wind-borne seeds.

The Fauna

Knowledge of the variety of mammals, snakes and insects that exist in the Austin Lodge Valley is surprisingly meagre. Badger setts are clearly visible along the hedgerows. In long spells of dry weather, the badgers come down at night to dig in the lawns and verges of nearby houses. Foxes frequently visit gardens in Eynsford, and rabbits in numbers occupy the Birches, Preston Hill and associated shaws and hedgerows. There are claims that adders, slow worms and signs of dormice have been seen. Sadly, hedgehogs have not been seen for a number of years.

Young Badger

There are no records of the numbers and species of birds seen within the valley but records of their presence have been kept for licensed ringing purposes in a nearby garden.

Most dominant over the last five years have been chaffinches, blue tits, blackbirds and great tits though to what extent these are typical of 'valley' birds we do not know. There are skylarks in the cornfields, and recent memories of swallows lining up on telegraph wires for the migration south.

Skylark

Birds of prey are regularly seen, including buzzards, sparrow hawks and kestrels. Less welcome are the magpies which have increased significantly in number over the last few years, and which predate on the nests of smaller birds.

The Austin Lodge Valley, especially the grasses on chalk, still supports good numbers of butterflies and moths. Of the former, numbers of the common blue, chalk-hill blue, white admiral and the grizzled skipper are in evidence on warm, south-west facing grassy banks on summer days.

Chalkhill Blue

One member of the fauna of the Austin Lodge Valley deserves special mention, since it is very much associated with the valley by local people. This is the Roman (edible) snail or *helix pomatia* to give it its biological name, the word *pomatia* coming from the Greek for 'pot lid', referring to the chalky substance with which it seals its shell before hibernating.

Helix pomatia seems to like the hedgerows of the south west side of the valley where it is least disturbed. In his Descent of Man, Charles Darwin recorded evidence of intelligence, communication and homing instinct among Roman snails.

Helix pomatia

"Historic farmsteads and their buildings make a fundamental contribution to the richly varied character of our countryside .... through their diversity of form and scale and their location in the landscape".
Historic Farmsteads in the High Weald AONB, 2008.

4 Settlement: Farms and Fields

Introduction

It is possible, given that the Austin Lodge Valley runs into the valley of the River Darent, that like the Darenth Valley, it has been settled for some thousands of years. There is no dated archaeological evidence for this. More certain is evidence for Anglo Saxon and early medieval settlement around the valley, including coin finds and place names. Other evidence includes the earthworks and field system on Round Hill, a linear enclosure near Chalkhurst Wood and six or seven sites of field systems and cropmarks scattered around the valley. The oldest of the current buildings in the valley date to the late 17th century.

The Settlements

There are three current points of settlement in the valley: Chalkhurst, Lower Austin Lodge Farm and Upper Austin Lodge Farm. Chalkhurst is the first building as you proceed southwards on Upper Austin Lodge Road. It is a fine looking Edwardian residence, renovated by Mr Frederick Hynard in the 1920s. Until the 1970s the house and grounds were an integral part of Lower Austin Lodge Farm. Chickens were raised at Chalkhurst for the sale of eggs to local villages.

Next along the road comes Lower Austin Lodge Farm itself. The view of the farm is particularly fine because it can be seen from the road in a slightly elevated position, with a backdrop of the valley side rising to the ridge-line of trees. The farmhouse and the barn are of historic interest, being listed Grade II and dating from the late 17th or early 18th century. There was a residence/farmhouse here much earlier, known as 'South Court' which is mentioned in a document of the time of Edward III (1312-1377).

SOUTH-COURT is a manor here, which was antiently part of the estate of the family of Eynesford, already mentioned, and was formerly parcel of Eynsford-castle. John de St. Clere possessed this manor in the 20th year of king Edward III. at which time he paid aid for it. In the reign of king Henry VII it was come into the name of Dinham.

The MANOR *of* ORKESDEN, the mansion of which is now called, by corruption, Aston-LODGE, was antiently possessed by a family, who took their surname from their residence here. William de Orkesden, in the 12th and 13th years of king John's reign held half a knight's see in Eynsford, by knight's service of the archbishop.

Edward Hasted, The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent, Vol. 2 1797

The timber barn at Upper Austin Lodge Farm, the next farm along the road, is Listed Grade II and dates from the late 17th century. The farmland here is steeper and more undulating and as well as some arable cropping, has been long associated with horses and dairy cattle.

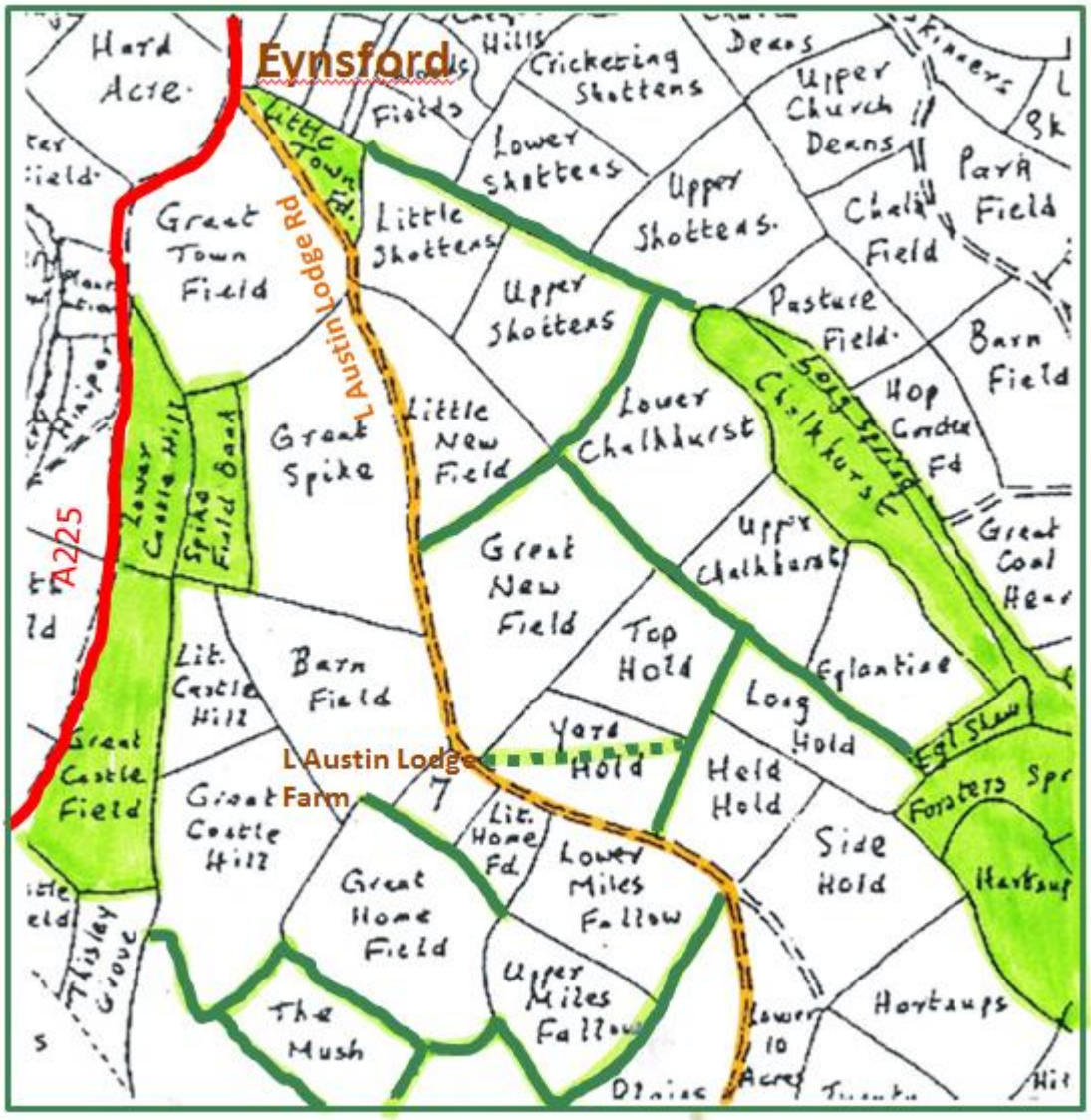
The Fields

In his book *A Farming Century, the Darent Valley 1892-1992*, Mr William Alexander gives the area of Lower Austin Lodge Farm as just under 350 acres, the boundary with Upper Austin Lodge Farm running across the valley a little to the south of the farmstead.

According to the tithe map of 1842 there were at least 20 fields associated with Lower Austin Lodge Farm. These had names such as 'Upper Shottens', 'Great Spike', 'Eglantine', 'Top Hold' and 'Lower Miles Fallow'. The number and pattern of the fields looks very different today. Under the influence of more intensive farming methods, the introduction of more and larger machinery and the need to produce more and cheaper home grown food, thousands of miles of hedgerows have been lost across the country and the Austin Lodge Valley is not an exception.

Map 2 attempts to trace the current field boundaries overlaying those of 1842, not to suggest that there was something *right* about the old boundaries, but to bring forward from history a part of the culture of the Austin Lodge Valley. Indeed, the former boundaries can still be seen in the landscape, perhaps in the fold of a particular piece of land or as the sun sets casting shadows on small ridges within a field. The current field boundaries on Map 2 are not definitive but they have been sourced from OS maps, aerial photographs and tramping the ground.

One delightful artefact that has surfaced in relation to farming and field boundaries, is a felt-work map produced by a then young member of the Hynard family, who farmed the lower Austin Lodge valley. This unique document maps the fields as they were in 1967. It is shown as Map 3. If you look closely, two things stand out. One is that the field boundaries at that time, only 50 years ago, were much more similar to those of 1842 than to those of today. The other is the wide variety of crops then grown at Lower Austin Lodge Farm compared with today.



Map 2 Lower Austin Lodge Farm Fields in 1842 and today

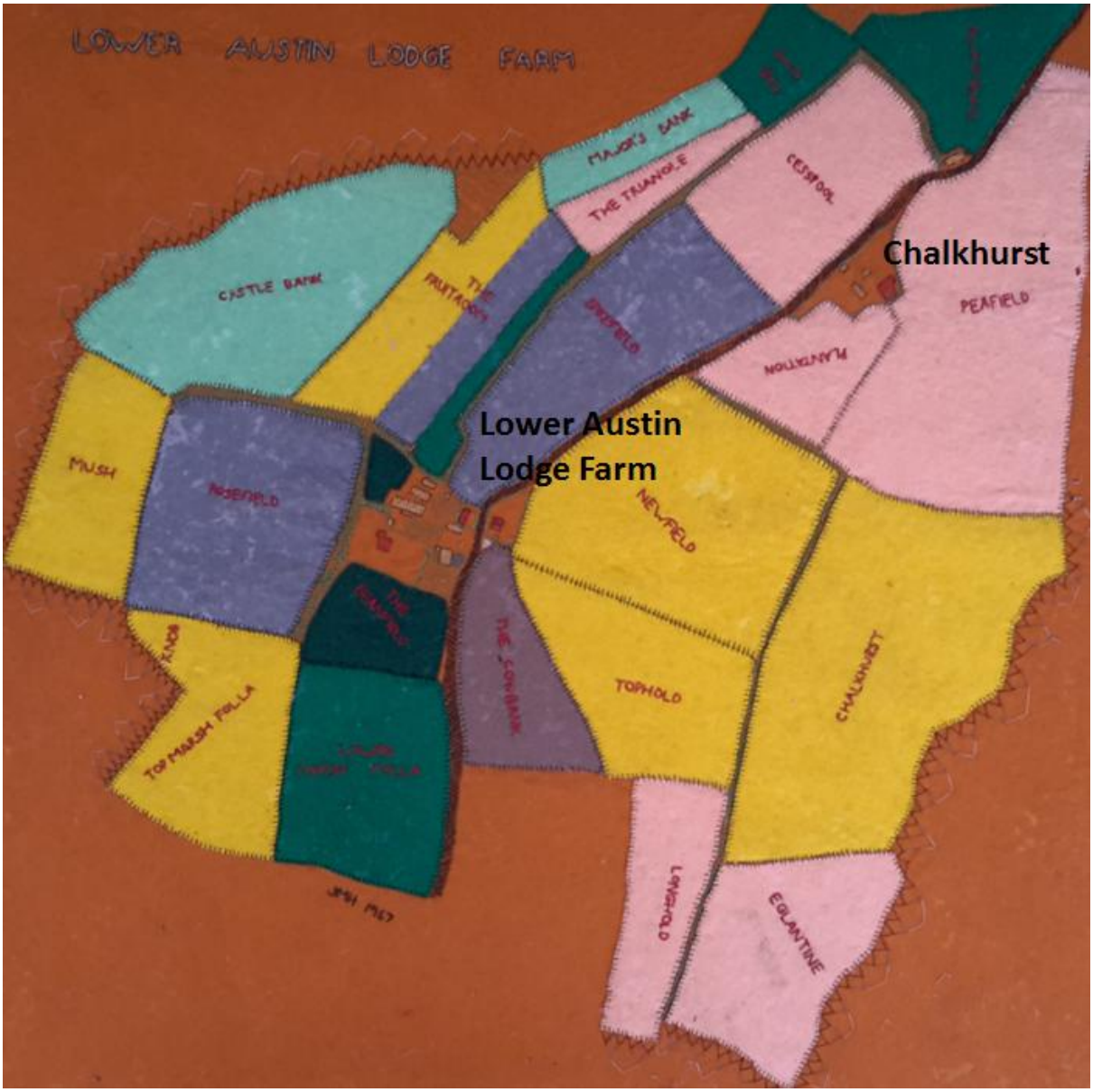
Key

A225

L Austin Lodge Road

Woods

Modern Field Boundary



Map 3 Lower Austin Lodge Farm Field Boundaries in the 1960s

Key to crops

Barley Wheat Runner Beans
Potatoes Cabbage Hay Grazing

"[Landscape] is mostly about what makes our local area distinctive and unique, and about how our experience of the area makes us feel".
Assessing and Maintaining Local Distinctiveness, Hampshire County Council, 2012.

5 Appreciating the Austin Lodge Valley

Introduction

The Austin Lodge Valley is protected at the national level in two ways: by its location within the London Green Belt and as part of the North Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

National statutory protection of countryside does not necessarily guarantee protection from development. It is subject to interpretation of the aims of legislation on Green Belts and AONBs, on the National Planning Policy Framework, on local government policies and on the case law built up in disputes over development in planning appeals.

This is far too big and complex a subject to be covered here. What it does mean, though, is that gathering a solid, detailed and community-supported evidence base on treasured landscapes like the Austin Lodge Valley is an important part of the process of protecting such landscapes. Understanding how the planning system works is also part of that process.

The Green Belt

Two general points regarding Green Belts and development are worth making. First, Green Belt legislation is generally concerned with the 'open-ness' of land and not with the nature or quality of landscape. Second, some development is considered to be 'not inappropriate' in a Green Belt and this relates to agriculture, forestry and, in some cases, housing. Development proposals along these lines can also fall foul of other local development plan policies or provisions within the government's National Planning Policy Framework which protect against harmful visual impact or harm to the character of the countryside. This was the case in the example of Upper Austin Lodge Farm described in Section 1. These provisions are becoming increasingly important in the protection of high landscape quality Green Belt land.

The Kent Downs AONB

AONB is a statutory designation of land, the legal framework for which is set out in the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. The aim of AONBs (there are 33 within England) is the conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty of the designated area. The Kent Downs AONB stretches from the London/Surrey borders to the White Cliffs of Dover. The Austin Lodge Valley is a tiny part of this area. In terms of protection policies, AONBs have the same planning status as National Parks.

AONBs are managed by a Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) made up of members of local councils in the area and other organisations such as the National Farmers Union and English Heritage. The JAC must produce a Management Plan for the entire AONB. Amongst the special qualities and distinctive features of the Kent Downs AONB, cited in the current Management Plan, are secluded dry valleys, networks of tiny lanes, isolated farmsteads, ancient woodlands and delicate chalk grassland. All of these features are present in the Austin Lodge Valley. In a 'have your say' survey of the

Kent Downs AONB in 2008, the top three most valued features were scenery and views (83%), peace and quiet (49%) and wildlife (48%).

Landscape Character Assessment

Although quality of landscape is seen by Natural England, the government's advisor on the natural environment of England, as "... an important part of the quality of life for people everywhere", it is nevertheless an under-valued part of planning legislation and is often over-ridden by other matters when development is proposed.

But how is the quality of landscape to be understood? A Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) aims to find out how the various elements of landscape – geology, soils, flora and fauna and human settlement - combine together to make a particular type of landscape. It is also concerned to identify how and why a landscape is being degraded or becoming unsightly. From here, it is a short step to understanding what people value in the landscape of specific places. An LCA can be carried out at any geographic scale, ranging from large tracts of land to the level of a 10,000 scale OS map. Mostly, landscapes at the scale of the Austin Lodge Valley get missed out in the generality of such exercises.

The Sevenoaks Area Landscape Character Assessment

Sevenoaks District Council commissioned an LCA of its area in 2004 and adopted the results as Supplementary Planning Guidance for the district wide Local Plan. *The Sevenoaks Countryside Assessment* based its analysis of landscape features on six criteria:

- aesthetics
- key characteristics
- visual unity
- ecological integrity
- condition of heritage features, and
- impact of built development

Using these criteria, the assessment found that there were 13 broad landscape types and 53 individual local landscape character areas in Sevenoaks District. The Austin Lodge Valley lies within a broad landscape area called 'Downs Farmland', with a local landscape character called 'Eynsford Downs East', an area stretching from the River Darent to West Kingsdown and from the M25 to near Otford.

Downs Farmland is described as "... an intensively farmed, rolling downland landscape with deep, dry valleys and broad plateau tops. There is a feeling of enclosure created by the topography and mature woodland growing along the ridgelines. There is a strong field pattern, but the hedgerows are breaking down and being replaced by post and wire fencing. Settlement is limited to a scattering of isolated farmsteads and small hamlets."

The LCA also found that some woodland is poorly managed, and hedgerows, while representing much of the semi-natural habitat, are in decline within the fields.

A Landscape Assessment of the Austin Lodge Valley

Our landscape assessment includes the effects of geology, descriptions of particular views, and the 'niche environments' of fauna and flora. Official landscape assessments hardly ever bring out what people actually *feel* and *value* about special landscape areas like the Austin Lodge Valley.

In order to seek some enlightenment on this question, we asked 25 people living within and beyond Eynsford to write down between 15 and 20 words that best described the way they experienced the Austin Lodge Valley in their everyday lives, perhaps whilst walking the dog, rambling through it or seeking some sort of solace. People responded with over 450 words which were then formed into a 'word cloud' graphic to see which words came up most often, and so seemed to be most representative of what the Austin Lodge Valley meant to people.

The handsome tree created as a word cloud on the front cover is made up of all the words in the survey. The 'standout' words are mainly about *mental wellbeing*, including the words 'peaceful', 'tranquil', 'calming' and 'serene'. These sit alongside a second level of words which perhaps suggest *why* the valley has these effects, such as 'unspoilt', 'undulating', 'hedgerows and 'nature'.

The word clouds called 'Elements' and 'Feelings' divide the words given in the survey into the features that make up the landscape and people's emotional reactions to the landscape. This division gives more detail on what people feel about the valley, and what promotes those feelings. Regarding *elements* we get 'birds', 'badgers', 'blackberries' and 'views' at a first level and 'wildflowers', 'farming' and 'the forge' at a second level. For *feelings*, the words 'peaceful', 'tranquil', 'unspoilt' and 'beautiful' come through even more strongly.

This analysis may not be rigorous social science but it is a first step in understanding what makes beautiful scenery and why it is so highly valued.

Elements

Feelings

Parish plans and village design statements ... are very useful, but would be greatly strengthened by a clear expression of how that community sits in its wider, but local, environmental setting.
Assessing and Maintaining Local Distinctiveness, Hampshire County Council, 2012

6 Some Concluding Comments

In discussions with people who live within or near the Austin Lodge Valley, or begin a country walk there or write about their impressions in internet blogs, it is clear that the valley is considered 'special' in a number of different ways which come together in the idea of a 'treasured landscape'.

A recent suggestion that the lower part of the Austin Lodge Valley might be suitable for housing, caused a number of people living within Eynsford and beyond to come together to consider why such development in this place was unsuitable. However this is not a polemical or protest document, but a genuine attempt to find evidence for the special nature of this valley.

There is no single, overriding reason why the Austin Lodge Valley is a place of quality landscape. It is an assemblage of things which come together in one place in ways that are pleasing to the eye and satisfying to the mind. The basis of the assemblage is the geology and the Ice Age processes which have given the valley its shape, its soils, its flora and fauna and the potential, over the years, for different types of agriculture.

As you enter the Austin Lodge Valley it is very clearly exactly that: a valley or in this instance a 'dry valley'. There is no surface water and so it is named after one of its farms. As a valley it is long and narrow and shut off at its northern end by a high railway embankment. As you enter from the Eynsford end there is a strong sense of being drawn in to a secluded – almost secret - environment. Compared to its width, the valley sides are steep and everywhere in view. The lines of mixed woodland on the hill tops add to the sense of enclosure.

Learning about the geological and natural history of the valley, including its unique features such as Magpie Bottom, the Ancient Woodland and Local Wildlife Sites, leads on to finding out more about the human settlement of the valley.

There are some clues to former settlement in the sparse archaeological finds to date and the 'ghost' agriculture represented in field boundaries that are now lines on maps or shadows on the ground at sunset. Of course, present cropping and land management remind us that modern agriculture does much to preserve what is good about the way the valley looks as well as supply us with food.

We have two points to make as a result of this appreciation of the Austin Lodge Valley. One is that the current landscape assessment for the Sevenoaks area requires updating, especially in relation to its comments on the *quality* of landscapes and whether they are improving, remaining the same or deteriorating.

The second is that community-led local landscape assessments, carried out in partnership with a wide range of participants, should be encouraged, in much the same way as neighbourhood plans are made for villages and towns. This would ensure that ‘special’ places in a wider landscape such as the Austin Lodge Valley are given the consideration they deserve to properly protect them.

We welcome comments on and corrections to this document based upon knowledge of the landscape, flora and fauna, and settlement of the Austin Lodge Valley. We would also encourage others to produce similar documents on special views or scenery in the Eynsford area.

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