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### **The Working Landscape**

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This article is my contribution to the Chilterns Conservation Board (CCB) Landscape Conservation Action Plan (LCAP) which is the guiding document for the Chalk, Cherries and Chairs Landscape Partnership Scheme. It provides background to the Chilterns landscape and its distinctive character, and brings together the research, consultation and planning that have taken place since 2016, under the leadership of the CCB, and funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Bucks New University is a partner in the scheme.

Read the complete document here:

<https://www.chilternsaonb.org/uploads/Chalk,%20Cherries%20&%20Chairs/LCAP%20Part%201.pdf>

The Chilterns Conservation Board's statutory purposes are:

1. To conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the Chilterns AONB.
2. To increase the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the AONB.
3. In fulfilling these purposes, the Board has a duty to seek to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities within the AONB without incurring significant expenditure.

The following is from the Chalk, Cherries and Chairs website:

Chalk, Cherries and Chairs is the coming together of diverse organisations and communities in the Central Chilterns to work towards a vision of:

"A healthy, resilient, connected landscape; with its unique natural, historical, and cultural heritage cherished by present and future generations."

The name "Chalk, Cherries and Chairs" reflects the landscape, land use and industrial heritage of the Central Chilterns that the scheme focusses on. Led by the Chilterns Conservation Board, this major partnership will provide opportunities for people to get involved and volunteer; to increase and improve wildlife spaces; and for communities to learn, create and take action for heritage.

Addressing challenges:

Over the last 2 years, a development phase supported primarily by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), has created a strong partnership of organisations – ranging from UK-wide charities to local community groups – united to help address the real and immediate challenges facing the Central Chilterns – HS2, ancient woodland being sold off, wildlife habitats fragmented through development, traditional orchards and hedgerows disappearing, and an increasing disconnect between people and their local landscape.

What happens now:

The development phase of Chalk, Cherries and Chairs is now complete; an application has been made to the HLF for funds to deliver the scheme.

The outcome of the application will be known by January 2019

If successful, Chalk, Cherries and Chairs will start in spring 2019 with the recruitment of a team of delivery staff and will run for 5 years.

# The working landscape

Dr Helena Chance • Reader in the History and Theory of Design,  
Buckinghamshire New University

As we follow one of the well-marked footpaths through the Central Chiltern woodlands, barely another soul in sight, we are moved as much by the silence as by the stately beauty of the beech trees.

## Crafting the landscape

Today the quiet of the woods can be broken from time to time by a tractor in neighbouring fields, or the retort of a hunting gun. In the mid-19th century the woods and valleys echoed with the strike of an axe, the rasp of the saw, the hum of a lathe and the shouts of men as they laboured to supply fuel wood and timber for woodware and furniture workshops, or worked at the craft of 'bodging'. Bodgers were men who worked in the woods using a foot-powered pole lathe to supply turned chair parts for the furniture workshops and factories in and around High

## The Central Chilterns has been an industrial landscape since the first humans settled there

Wycombe, an industry that came to define the region.

Other men found work in chalk pits and quarries, in tile and brickmaking, or down in the Wye valley in corn, fulling or paper mills. Their wives and children worked in cottages



**Figure 1.** Chair bodging in Hampden Wood. The bodgers chop logs into billets before turning them on a pole lathe

Courtesy of Stuart King, Sam Rockall Collection

and workshops, making lace or plaiting straw to supply an insatiable market for dress trimmings and for hats.

The Central Chilterns has been an industrial landscape since the first humans settled there, extracting flints for tools and weapons and, over time, digging chalk for quicklime and clay for making bricks, tiles and vessels. Cement, made from chalk, sand and gravel, was in production in the Roman times. Tile making, which dates back to the 13th century, was also a lucrative trade and where tiles were made, so too were bricks; all came from the plentiful supplies of local surface clays. These, together with chalk and flints, are the building materials still seen in local houses. The Chesham firm, H.G. Matthews, continues to produce handmade bricks using the local Reading Formation clays.

Despite the quantity of useful minerals in the Chilterns, wood remained an essential resource for building, fencing, hurdle making and charcoal burning. Woods such as oak, ash, cherry and beech, were in such abundance that they supplied not only a local demand for fuel and woodware, but also served the great metropolis nearby.

Wood was carried by cart and wagon to the Thames near Windsor and thence by barge to London. It is said that the 'Windsor Chair', a type distinctive to the region, was named after this trading route. Another commodity, which became important to the economy of the Central Chilterns, arrived in the late 18th century. The River Wye, which joins the Thames at Bourne End, had supplied power for a string of corn and fulling mills at least since medieval times. With the coming of steam engines, the river enabled the establishment of a number of paper mills downstream of High Wycombe supplying, from one mill, award-winning papers to national and international markets. Entrepreneurs also seized the opportunities provided by new trading networks opened up with the coming of the canals to the district, from 1799, and then the railways, from 1832.

### Industrial expansion in the 19th century

For the Chilterns fuelwood industry, so vital to livelihoods, the new transport routes spelled potential disaster as coal could now be brought cheaply to London from the

North. The wooded landscape might have disappeared, and the population moved away, had landowners not promoted and financed the district's already fledgling furniture industry. They planted more beech trees to produce the tall, narrow timber suitable for furniture making. By the middle of the 19th century, the Chilterns and the town of High Wycombe were rapidly becoming the leading centre for chair making in Britain. The local woodware industry expanded at the same time and nearby Chesham became an important centre for the manufacture of wooden domestic and dairy utensils. While the men worked in the woods, or in workshops and factories, women and children laboured at lace making for clothing, or straw plaiting for hats, both crafts for which the Chilterns gained a reputation for quantity and quality. Increasing demands for fashionable dress in the 18th and 19th centuries saw a rapid growth of these traditional crafts and, by the 1850s, thousands were employed in cottages and workshops. Special craft schools were opened – three lace schools in Chinnor alone – to train children as young as five or six (figure 2). Dealers and wholesalers, mostly men, took supplies of lace to sell in London, or plaited straw to Dunstable and Luton, towns which became famous for hat-making.

### A light mark on the landscape

Unlike the textile landscapes of Derbyshire or Lancashire, where the physical presence of factory and labour can still be seen in the remains of the mills and waterways that powered them, the largely craft-based industries of the Chilterns are mostly invisible today. The temporary woodland shelters or 'hovels' where the bodgers set up their pole lathes to turn legs, spindles and stretchers for chairs are long gone. However, if you are out walking and look carefully, you may find a small deep hollow near an ancient footpath, once a saw-pit, where men called pit sawyers would transform tree trunks into planks. These men worked in pairs, the 'top dog' on top of the log, and the 'under dog' down in the pit. Examples of lace and plaited straw

## The largely craft-based industries of the Chilterns are mostly invisible today



Courtesy of Stuart King

**Figure 3.** Seasonal fruit pickers at Holmer Green, posing proudly on their extremely tall orchard ladders

can be discovered in local museums, but the only clues to these crafts in the landscape are the village name of Lacey Green, roads and lanes called 'Chairmaker Road' or 'Lace Lane', lace makers' cottages identified in old photographs, and buildings known to have been lace or straw plait schools, such as the former lace school in Watlington. The thin wheat originally grown on the land has been supplanted by high yielding corn for food, not hats.

There is however another industry that has left a light mark on the landscape or is being revived. Visit the village orchard at Prestwood in the spring and you can imagine Central Chilterns landscapes once blossoming with thousands of cherry and



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**Figure 2.** Children would learn their craft in plaiting schools held in cottages. Children under 10 worked for 5-8 hours per day, and over-10s for 10 hours (Engraving from Cassell's Family Magazine, 1882)

### Flackwell Cherries

*The Frognoors and the Bigaroos  
 The Blackhearts and Mirellas too,  
 The Hunies that all small birds attack  
 The Rivers and the Bastard Black  
 The Reynold Hearts they fill the sieves  
 The buds, the cherry pies to give.  
 The Casher which is red and black  
 But my favourite cherry is the nap.*

G.A.S. Bowler

other fruit trees. The craft industries could be casual and insecure so in the summer, men, women and children turned to harvesting the fruits which became central to the local economy, for pies, jams, dyes, and medicines. The cherry harvest was often celebrated in the chapels with cherry pie suppers; watch [this video](#) by Stuart King to find out more.

The decline of the Chilterns craft industries came in the late 19th century, with machine production and competition from abroad. By the 1920s, the numbers of bodgers, lace makers and straw plaiters had dropped from thousands to a few hundred. One bodger, Reg Tilbury, who worked from his cottage on the Hampden Estate purchased an oil engine in 1924 to turn his lathes and circular saw, but after the War he gave up bodging to grow strawberries. Luckily for some women, the thriving chair making industry in High Wycombe continued to provide home-based employment in caning and rushing chairs. But by the 1960s, the last bodger had abandoned his lathe, lace and plait making had become hobbies for a few, and the new generation were drawn to more lucrative employment in towns.

Today, timber is still harvested from the woods, but for most of us they are places for rest, not work, where we can walk, enjoy peace and quiet, and look out for wildlife. However, the woods, valleys and villages are living legacies to past industries, helping us to remember that industry, land, landscape and nature have always been co-dependent.



Daws Hill Vineyard

Figure 4. View from Daws Hill Vineyard across Radnage valley, showing the ploughed arable, irregular pasture and hedged fields typical of this landscape character



CCB

Figure 5. Apple juice locally produced by Drovers Hill Farm

### Mixed farming country

Farming has been an essential ingredient in the history and economy of the Central Chilterns but, on these marginal lands, farmers cannot rival the yields of the flat lowlands of Middle England. More than 70% remains as agricultural land, but it is mostly run as small- to medium-sized mixed farms with a combination of crops, livestock and pasture, that have adapted to local conditions and increasingly depend on small-scale diversity to survive. But what has made it difficult for farmers, has also made it attractive countryside for the beholder, with irregular fields, ancient hedgerows and a seasonal patchwork variety.

The chalk downlands and commons rely on grazing livestock to maintain them, so the long-term decline in livestock numbers caused by a global market which controls commodity prices, is especially concerning for the local landscape and economy.

### Going local with food and drink

The growing passion for locally-sourced food and beverages has created a rise in more traditional farm produce, from rare-breed meats and farm-made dairy products, to award-winning rape-seed oil, artisan bread, farm-pressed apple juice and craft beers. Farm shops and cafes have become popular family destinations. The chalky slopes of the Central Chilterns have been growing vines since Roman times, but now new commercial vineyards are joining established winemakers to produce prize-winning Chiltern wines.