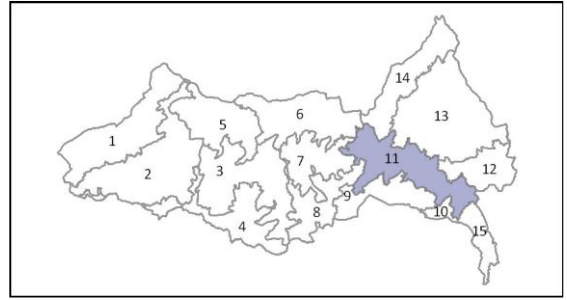


**LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREA 11: *EASTERN USK VALLEY*****Broad Landscape Type: *SETTLED VALLEYS******Description*****Location and Context**

This linear LCA includes the floor and lower sides of the Usk Valley. It extends from Pencelli to the eastern edge of the National Park near Abergavenny, and includes several settlements including Crickhowell, Talybont and Bwlch. It has nine adjacent LCAs, including the high land of the Central Beacons to the west and the Black Mountains to the east.

**Summary Description**

This settled, luxuriant valley contrasts with the surrounding open and craggy hills. Its wide, flat valley floor with its patchwork of fields is an important transport route, containing main roads and the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal. A fertile, agricultural landscape, the Usk Valley is also strongly influenced by parkland planting and in places is densely wooded. The valley has a long history of settlement, and contains several villages, numerous farms and country houses with their associated grounds. A series of Iron Age hillforts overlook the valley, and the southern part has industrial links with the Clydach Gorge and Blaenavon Industrial Landscape World Heritage Site.



*The Usk Valley west of Crickhowell*

**Historical Development of the Landscape**

The development of this landscape reflects its strategic role as a key route and transport corridor over millennia, as well as its long use for traditional agriculture and industry. Iron Age hillforts are prominent on the valley sides, with later defensive features including a series of Medieval mottes and castles such as Tretower. Villages developed at crossing points of the river, with some historic bridges surviving. Later, the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal was constructed along the valley, and the southern end was influenced by industrial development. The picturesque qualities of the valley were appreciated, and several small country houses were constructed, with associated parks and gardens.

## Distinctive Characteristics

- Underlying geology of Devonian sandstone and mudstone, giving a characteristic red colour to soils and river banks. Depositions of silt create fertile soil on the valley floor.
- A generally broad, flat-bottomed glaciated valley, with steep sides and occasional dome-shaped hills of harder rock rising from the valley floor.
- The wide and fast-flowing River Usk following a meandering course along the valley floor, fed by streams flowing along smaller tributary valleys. The Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal also follows the valley.
- A mixture of land uses, predominantly agriculture (mainly pastoral and some arable), but also parkland, settlements, woodlands and forests (particularly on steeper slopes).
- Valley floor fields generally more regular in shape than those on valley sides, creating a patchwork effect. Mostly bounded by hedges, but with stone walls in higher tributary valleys, and sometimes associated with estates.
- A well-treed landscape containing coniferous forests and bluebell woodlands on valley sides, riparian trees along watercourses, hedgerow trees and a range of specimen and veteran trees in parkland and gardens.
- Semi-Natural Habitats of Principal Importance to Wales including broadleaved woodland, neutral grassland, hedgerows and riverine habitats.
- Concentration of historic buildings and structures, including castles, churches, villages, bridges, farms and country houses. A series of Iron-Age hillforts look down from the valley sides. Industrial archaeology associated with Garn Ddyrys ironworks and the canal.
- The canal has distinctive lifting bridges, and a basin and inclined planes at Llanfoist. A well-settled landscape with a long history of use as a transport corridor.
- Settlements generally centred around historic bridging points of the Usk. At the southern end of the valley are more recent industrial villages (e.g. Gilwern).
- A soft, gentle, verdant landscape contrasting with the rugged higher land above. Deciduous trees provide seasonal changes in colour and texture.

## Landmap Components (See Appendix 3 for components of all LANDMAP Aspect Areas)

<b>Key Visual and Sensory Aspect Areas</b>	Usk Valley - Llangattock (H); Usk Valley Hills (H); Carnafell Valley and Talybont Forest (H); Crawnon Valley (H); Usk Valley East of Brecon (H); Usk Valley Northern Slopes (H); Crickhowell (H); Llanelly Hill (H); The Tumble (H); Gilwern (M); Lower Usk & Olway valleys (H); Sugar Loaf scarp slopes (H); River Usk (O); Govilon(L)
<b>Key to Landmap evaluation criteria:</b> (O) Outstanding: of international importance. (H) High: of regional or county importance. (M) Moderate: of local importance. (L) Low: of little/no importance	

## Settlements

This part of the Usk valley contains several settlements, the largest of which is Crickhowell. Most of the older settlements originate on the valley floor at crossing points on the river, although there are exceptions, such as Llanelli with its ancient churchyard. Later industrial settlements (Gilwern and Govilon) are associated with the canal. Farms are generally situated on the valley sides, and are often painted white. There is a close physical and visual relationship between settlements and their landscape setting- for example Table Mountain hillfort can be seen from the main street in Crickhowell. In recent years, expansion of settlements onto the side slopes of the valleys has made them more apparent in views.

## Key Views

Views across and into the valley from above contribute to the landscape quality and sense of place of adjacent LCAs, including the Central Beacons, Black Mountains, and Skirrid and Sugar Loaf. Framed views within the valley are contained - and often dominated - by the profiles of ridge tops above the valley sides.

## Evaluation

### Special Qualities

The natural beauty and recreational factors that make this landscape special are summarised in the table below, along with examples of their sensitivities to landscape changes:

Criteria	Special Qualities for this Landscape Character Area	Sensitivities
<b>Scenic quality and Sense of place</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The contrasts between the settled, fertile, wooded valley and the open rugged land above it create a landscape of high scenic quality and with a strong sense of place. This is enhanced by the distinctive profiles of the ridges along the tops of the valley sides. Vistas constantly change along the valley.</li> </ul>	Introduction of intrusive development which affects the composition of the landscape, or the profiles of the ridges.
<b>Landscape quality and integrity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A well-managed landscape, with a strong sense of time-depth, and although in places there is an awareness of modern developments this is generally not overwhelming.</li> </ul>	<p>Agricultural changes affecting the traditional management and appearance of the landscape (e.g hedgerow loss).</p> <p>Insensitive development which is poorly designed, sited or out of scale in relation to the surrounding landscape.</p>
<b>Perceptual qualities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pockets of tranquillity occur in tributary valleys, away from the influences of main roads and settlements. Western ends of tributary valleys (below the Central Beacons) are within the BBNP core dark skies area.</li> </ul>	<p>Impacts from visually or audibly intrusive development.</p> <p>Increase in light pollution from roads and settlements.</p>
<b>Artistic and cultural associations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tretower and the Usk Valley sketched by artist JMW Turner .Writer JRR Tolkein reputedly stayed at Buckland Hall while writing <i>Lord of the Rings</i>.</li> </ul>	
<b>Rarity or representativeness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One of the best examples in the National Park of a fertile valley in very close proximity to rugged uplands.</li> <li>Contains important and rare industrial archaeology, particularly in relation to the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal, and the transport of industrial products to it.</li> </ul>	<p>Loss of the traditional composition of the landscape.</p> <p>Loss of industrial archaeology due to neglect, damage and natural processes.</p>
<b>Natural heritage features</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nature conservation sites include the River Usk (designated SSSI and SAC as a high-quality example of a river flowing over sandstone, with its associated habitats, plant and animal species within a linear ecosystem). The Usk tributaries are also designated SSSI, as are the Usk Bat Sites. Ancient woodland occurs along tributary streams, and there is a forest nature reserve at Dyffryn Crawnnon.</li> </ul>	<p>Pollution affecting water quality.</p> <p>Decline in traditional woodland management.</p> <p>Loss of ecological connectivity.</p>
<b>Cultural heritage features</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A series of historic parks and gardens along the valley, reflecting the many opportunities to exploit</li> </ul>	Loss of mature parkland trees due to age, disease or

	<p>its picturesque setting. Many contain veteran trees.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Numerous Scheduled Monuments, plus other archaeological sites, reflect the area's need for defence in the Iron Age, Roman and Medieval periods. Others represent its surviving built heritage (churches, bridges etc). The historic core of Crickhowell is a Conservation Area. The north and south of the area are included on the Register of Landscapes of Special Historic Interest in Wales (areas 58 and 16).</li> <li>• Important industrial archaeology associated with the canal and transport of iron products from Blaenavon (e.g. Llanfoist canal basin, tunnels, tramways, inclines, lifts etc.). The southern part of the LCA is included within the Blaenavon Industrial Landscape World Heritage Site.</li> </ul>	<p>storm damage. Lack of replacement of parkland trees.</p> <p>Loss of archaeological sites/features due to erosion, damage and natural processes.</p> <p>Neglect of built heritage and designed landscapes (particularly those in private ownership) and loss of character due to insensitive modernisation.</p>
<b>Opportunities for landscape enjoyment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A network of footpaths (including the Beacons Way, Usk Valley Walk and canal towpath) provide opportunities to explore the valley landscape and access the surrounding higher land. Forest Nature Reserve at Dyffryn Crawnon.</li> </ul>	
<b>Recreation provision and access</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good visitor infrastructure in the main valley (hotels, restaurants, pubs, campsites etc.). Recreation opportunities encompassing cultural sites such as Tretower.</li> </ul>	<p>Physical impacts (e.g. erosion, traffic) and impacts on the character of popular sites due to recreation pressure.</p>

### Contribution to Ecosystem Services and Green Infrastructure (Refer to sections 4.6 & 4.7 for terminology)

The River Usk and associated valley landscape provides food (pasture and arable farming), water (through abstraction) and woodland timber sources. The low lying landscape or arable floodplain and woodland stands support flood alleviation and climate regulation which benefits local settlements. The River Usk provides food and recreation services including fish, angling, watercraft and access to water. In common with the rest of the National Park, this LCA also contributes to cultural services such as spiritual enrichment, cultural heritage, recreation and tourism and aesthetic experiences. Prominent Green Infrastructure features include the River Usk, Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal, and woodlands. There are also long distance routes such as the Usk Valley Walk, Beacons Way and Taff Trail.



*The Usk at Crickhowell*



*Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal, Talybont*



*Valley floor scene near Buckland hill*



## **Forces for Change in the Landscape**

### **Local Forces for Change and Their Landscape Implications**

(See also the general forces for change described in section 6.0)

#### **Past and Present**

- Development pressure causing settlements to expand up valley sides and become more visible in views across and within the valley.
- Continued demand for new housing and other development.
- The need to extend/ modernise traditional buildings to maintain viability and comfort.
- Introduction of pylon lines, particularly at the eastern end of the valley.
- Increase in traffic and upgrades to road infrastructure, including localised impacts from the A465 Heads of the Valleys Road.
- Water abstraction, and impoundment in upstream reservoirs, affecting the natural water flow and river processes in the River Usk. These factors, coupled with lowering of land levels in the floodplain (due to a reduction in groundwater levels) increase the area's susceptibility to flood risk.
- Increased volumes of sediment entering the River Usk due to increased ploughing, and a lack of semi-natural woodland alongside the river in LCAs 6 and 11. This affects the extent of sediment deposition in the riparian zone and impacts on river processes and ecology.
- Agricultural changes, e.g. decline in traditional hillfarms and grazing patterns, and the introduction of new crops such as oil seed rape and maize which affect the appearance of the landscape.
- Removal of hedgerows/ stone walls or replacement with post-and-wire fencing.
- Pressure for larger agricultural buildings and infrastructure (e.g. biodigester).
- Neglect of parkland and designed landscapes.
- Management of commercial forests, particularly as trees reach maturity.
- Recreation pressure at popular sites (erosion, litter, car parking issues etc.)
- Loss/ neglect of archaeological sites and historic features.
- Inclusion of the southern part of the area in the Blaenavon Industrial Landscape World Heritage Site should positively affect the management of industrial heritage features within the landscape.

#### **Future**

- Continued demand for housing and other development, and for improvements to transport and infrastructure.
- Continued agricultural change, including intensification of farming methods (requiring farm building infrastructure), new woodland planting, new Glastir agri-environmental schemes and crop changes.
- Potential for extraction of mineral resources, with associated visual and noise impacts.
- Ageing of commercial forestry plantations and the impacts of felling on landscape and biodiversity.



*Hedgebanks replaced with post and wire fencing and commercial forestry on valley sides, Crawnon Valley.*



*Agricultural changes: ploughing of valley side land, large farm buildings and horse jumps near Llangattock.*



*Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century housing in Crickhowell expanding the settlement up the hillside*

## Strategy

### Overall Strategy

**To retain and enhance the special qualities of the landscape, ensuring that demands for development and infrastructure do not adversely affect its composition.** Any new development, infrastructure and recreation facilities sit comfortably within the landscape. Agricultural changes are undertaken sensitively, with traditional features and grazing regimes maintained. Archaeological and historic sites are protected and managed, and built heritage is in a good state of repair. The biodiversity of the area is retained and enhanced, and appropriate recreation - including appreciation of cultural sites - is encouraged and well managed.

### LCA-Specific Management Guidelines

#### Protect

- Protect the **open upland skylines** of the tops of the valley sides which frame the valley.
- Protect the **composition of the landscape** with its continuous vistas of fertile lowlands and woodland, juxtaposed with the distinctive craggy uplands and moorland above.
- Protect and appropriately manage the landscape's numerous **historic and archaeological sites, and designed parkland landscapes**.
- Protect and enhance the **built heritage** of the area and the settings of settlements.
- **Protect (and manage) historic features within the agricultural landscape** such as **hay meadows, field boundaries and narrow lanes**.

#### Manage

- Manage **recreation** where necessary to encourage enjoyment of the landscape and its cultural sites, but minimise its impacts on the landscape and biodiversity of the area. Also minimise conflicts between different recreational users (e.g. canoeists and fishermen).
- Manage **farmland**, enabling change to occur sensitively, and encouraging a viable farming community using traditional methods to manage traditional landscape features and enhance biodiversity.
- Manage **semi-natural habitats** such as grassland and river corridors to retain biodiversity, using appropriate management and levels of grazing.
- Manage **woodland** to improve age and species diversity, using traditional techniques (e.g. coppicing) where appropriate, and control of non-native species where necessary.
- Manage **archaeological sites** and their settings, with sensitive interpretation as appropriate. Manage relevant sites with regard to the World Heritage Site Management Plan.
- Manage **designed landscapes**, replacing parkland/ veteran trees to ensure their continued presence within the landscape.
- Manage **plantations** to enhance their biodiversity and appearance within the landscape, particularly as trees reach maturity.

#### Plan

- Plan for **community education and involvement** in the management of the area.
- Plan for the **creation, extension and linking of semi-natural habitats** such as heather moorland, woodland and species-rich grasslands.
- Plan to **minimise the visual impacts of new development and infrastructure** on this area, ensuring that new developments are **well designed and sited**.
- Plan to retain the dark skies in the western part of the area, and reduce incidence of light pollution.
- Plan to **underground power lines** where feasible.