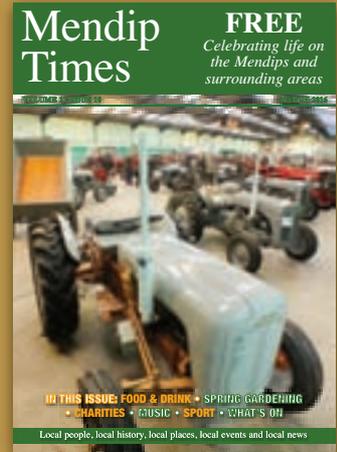
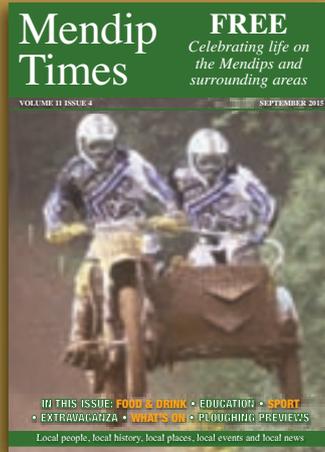
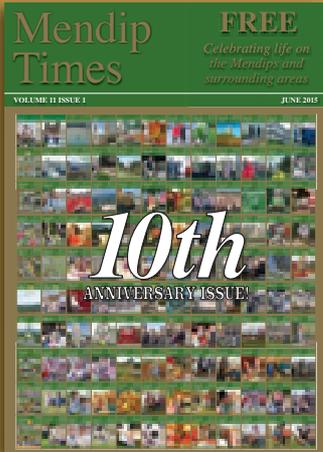


# Mendip Times

**FREE**  
*Celebrating life on the Mendips and surrounding areas*

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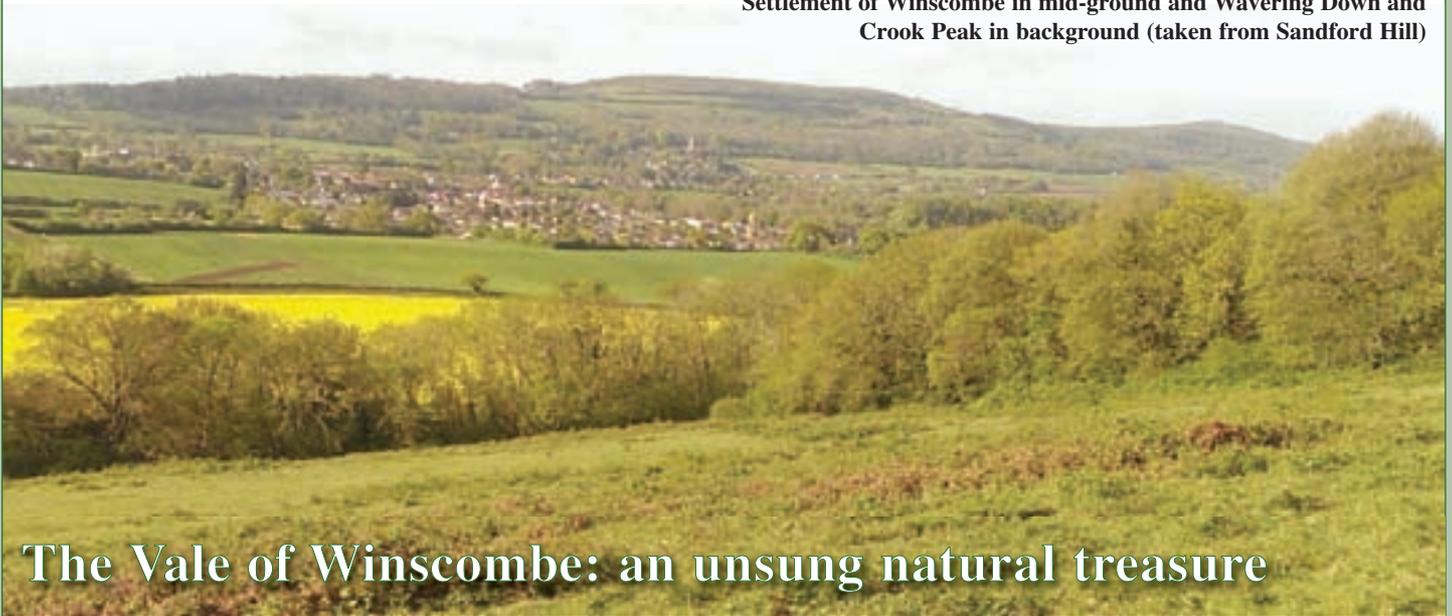
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Settlement of Winscombe in mid-ground and Wavering Down and Crook Peak in background (taken from Sandford Hill)



## The Vale of Winscombe: an unsung natural treasure



By Dr LINCOLN GARLAND

I HAVE lived in the West Country for 25 years and in the Vale of Winscombe in the Mendip Hills for the last two. As a geographer and an ecologist, it immediately struck

me that the topography and landscape of the vale and the adjoining Lox Yeo Valley, are very different from anything else in the central/western Mendips.

These natural and physical characteristics are rarely celebrated in the many published accounts of this area, which is an omission I hope to



Spectacular display of Wild Garlic in Kings Wood on the slopes of Cross Plain on the southern edge of the valley

square here.

For the most part, the central/western Mendips consist of a wide undulating plateau, incised in a few places by steep rocky gorges. To the west of Black Down, however, the hills divide to reveal a wide low-lying basin, roughly 4.5 miles long and 1.5 miles across. The basin has two key components; the Vale of Winscombe on the upper eastern side and the Lox Yeo Valley on the lower ground to the west.

The Strawberry Line Path, which extends north to south across the basin, roughly marks the transition between the two. The basin is enclosed by the Dolebury, Sandford and Banwell ridgelines to the north; the Shute Shelve Hill – Callow Hill and Crook Peak – Wavering Down – ridgelines to the south; and Bleadon Hill to the west.

To understand this distinctive landscape we must first go back to the Carboniferous period, 300-350 million years ago, when tropical shallow seas bathed the Mendip area, gradually laying down the limestone rock that dominates the geology today (recall that limestone consists of the skeletal fragments of countless millions of marine organisms such as corals and molluscs).

At the end of this period, tectonic pressures were uplifting the limestone and other sedimentary deposits, creating the Mendip Hills, or rather mountains as they then were. Fast forward a 100-150 million years to the desert environment of the Triassic and these mountains were undergoing rapid erosion, which broadly formed the expansive basin evident today.

Flash flooding washed gravels, stones

and boulders into the upper valley, contributing to the undulating topography of Vale of Winscombe; while finer grained mudstones were more readily transported by floodwaters and deposited lower down across the broad flat plain of the Lox Yeo Valley.

The special visual attributes of the Vale of Winscombe and Lox Yeo Valley are a product of these geological processes in combination with various ecological and cultural influences and are reflected through inclusion within the Mendip Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). AONB status means that the valley and the wider central/western Mendip area is considered to represent one of the nation's most distinctive and naturally beautiful landscapes.

While the ridgelines encompassing the basin define this treasured terrain and provide a sense of enclosure and sanctuary, the wide valley bottom in itself also greatly contributes to the attractiveness of the landscape, affording far-reaching views in all directions, which encapsulate some of the Mendips' most striking ridgelines and hilltops.

Further to this, the contrasting landscape of the valley floor also deserves recognition here. While the entire valley is pastoral in character, variance between the Vale of Winscombe and the Lox Yeo Valley is clearly evident. In addition to its rolling topography, the vale is also characterised by its tapestry of extensively farmed fields; sunken lanes, tracks and droves; small woodlands; and overgrown hedgerows. The time-honoured status of the hedgerows is evident from the wide

Dr Garland is an ecological consultant working for Biodiversity by

variety of tree and shrub species present, including many mature oaks, and also their rich colourful ground flora comprising abundant bluebells, wild garlic, lesser stichwort and primroses.

Conversely, the Lox Yeo Valley is a much flatter open landscape, distinguished in particular by the valley's eponymously named river and its many short tributaries. The prominence of Crook Peak, which stands sentry over Loxton Pass, the gateway to the Somerset Levels, is also a defining feature of the lower valley.

Loxton and other passes add greatly to the landscape quality, providing splendid views south-west to Brent Knoll and beyond to the Quantocks and Exmoor; and also northwest to Weston Woods, and across the Severn Estuary as far as the Brecon Beacons.

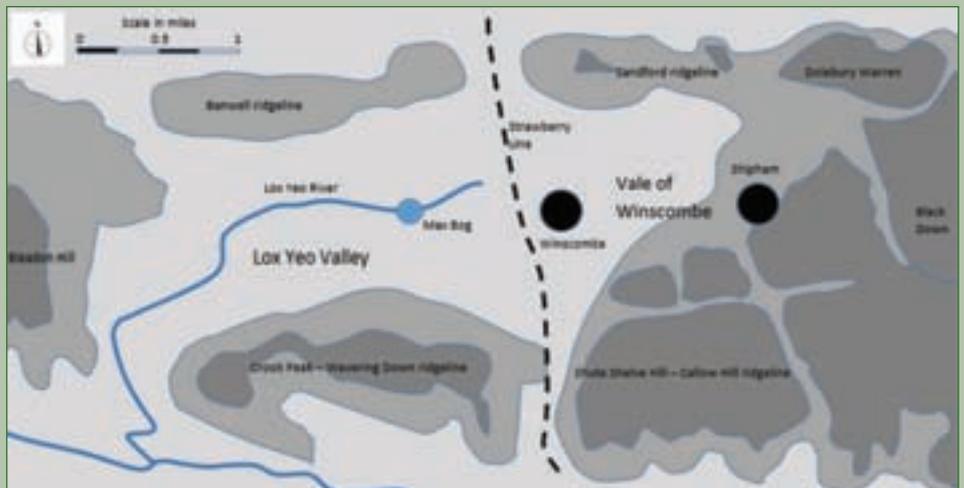
The geology and varied landscape have in turn encouraged a rich variety of habitats, plants and animals to establish. The many flower-rich limestone grasslands that fringe the hillsides are dependent on the shallow nutrient-deficient and lime-rich soils. Such impoverished conditions prevent domination by a small number of large aggressive plant species, thereby allowing a wide diversity of herbs and fine grasses to flourish.

The limestone grasslands of greatest ecological worth can be found between Shute Shelve Hill and Crook Peak, and also on Dolebury Warren. The former represents one part of the Mendip Limestone Grasslands Special Area of Conservation (SAC), while both are Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

While locals instinctively recognise the beauty and ecological value of these sites, few probably appreciate that SACs and SSSIs are sites that have been formally recognised as being of European and National biodiversity value respectively.

Ancient woodlands also skirt the valley sides, and include Banwell, Sandford and Broad Knoll. To be considered as ancient a woodland must have existed continuously since 1600 or before. Having had hundreds of years to develop complex and interrelated plant, animal and fungal communities, ancient woodlands support prodigious biodiversity.

The undisturbed soils of these, and other longstanding woodlands in the valley, nearly all produce spectacular and deeply cherished displays of bluebells



and wild garlic each spring. Notable fauna includes the secretive dormouse and, in Banwell Woods, the greater horseshoe bat.

These bats hibernate within hillside caves which form one component of the designated North Somerset and Mendip Bats SAC. The combination of stock grazed pasture and long-standing woodlands, both within the valley and across the wider Mendips, provides ideal habitat for this bat species.

With respect to the valley floor, Max Bog on the western edge of Winscombe is the jewel-in-the-crown from a biodiversity perspective. This site, which is also designated a SSSI, is a lime-rich lowland mire, supporting a tremendous variety of wetland rushes, sedges, grasses and herbs, including many rarities. Wet woodland copses complement the wetland habitat mosaic.

One meadow in particular, visible from Max Mill Lane, performs an amazing wildflower display in early summer, producing masses of yellow rattle, ragged robin, buttercups, orchids and many other colourful herbs. Breeding birds which can be seen at Max Bog include kestrel, willow warbler, reed bunting and spotted flycatcher, all species which probably breed nowhere else on the valley floor (kestrel being the possible exception).

Please enjoy the fragile habitats of Max Bog from the public right of way only, unless issued with a visitor's permit from the Avon Wildlife Trust. At Max Bog, the Winscombe Brook feeds into the Lox Yeo River, the latter being the only stream of significance in the central/western Mendips.

The paucity of surface level streams on the Mendips is once more explained by the geology. On reaching limestone, which is permeable, streams rapidly

disappear underground into a huge sub-surface river system; the Mendips is said to have the largest in Britain. The Vale of Winscombe includes many springs from which sub-surface streams re-emerge.

These mostly feed into the Lox Yeo River which meanders down the valley for roughly three miles before joining with the River Axe just south of Loxton Pass. Sea trout, brown trout and bullhead are all said to inhabit the river.

Much has been written about the Strawberry Line and so I do not intend to go into detail here other than to reiterate what a fantastic wildlife and recreational resource it is. Sadly house-builders see the line, which is designated as a local nature reserve, as a boundary up to which they should develop.

If this trend continues, however, there is a risk that housing will enclose the line on one side or the other (or both) for most of its route across the valley, detracting from its very special qualities and also people's enjoyment of the wider AONB.

The Vale of Winscombe/Lox Yeo Valley is a unique component of the Mendip Hills. Nowhere else can be found such a long and expansive valley floor, including a network of spring fed streams, and encircled on all sides by some of the Mendips' most distinctive hilltops and ridgelines.

It's a landscape that has been created over millions of years by geological, climatic and ecological processes, and more recently by rural land management that on the whole has proven relatively benign. Let us hope that new development and ongoing farming practices will be undertaken sustainably to preserve this exceptional and sensitive environment for posterity.