**Response Document**

**Natural England’s**

**Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty: Boundary Variation Project**

**Name of Proposed Extension Area**

Dockenfield Hills

**C1 Does this area have sufficient natural beauty to be designated as AONB?**

√ Yes

*Reasons:* Comments below are relevant both to the extension proposed in the Consultation Document (CD), and to the additional area proposed in response to C5:

* Contiguous with existing AONB
* Points identified as of significance in the Consultation Document:
* Tranquillity
* Rural backwater ambience
* Ancient woods, well-managed hedgerows, and majestic oaks
* Winding lanes
* Folds of landscape which afford far and long distant views.

**C2 Is there any other important information that we should include in our assessment of this area’s natural beauty?**

√ Yes

*Reasons:* Comments below are relevant both to the proposed extension in the Consultation Document, and to the additional area proposed in response to C5:

The proposed Dockenfield Hills Extension Area does not, in contrast to original evaluation area, include the area south of Old Lane, primarily owing to the lack of an on-the-ground boundary between Surrey and Hampshire. In so doing, areas of significant beauty around Great Holt, and east from there, across the hills extending towards and later bordering the River Wey, have been overlooked and therefore face being lost from the extended AONB. These areas afford further long views of natural beauty. In particular it is the views to the south from Old Lane that add great value – as is very clearly demonstrated by the appealing photograph of one of these views (from Manor House) that forms the cover of the Consultation Document itself. The areas are frequently used and appreciated by walkers (residents and visitors alike) for the varied landscape and wildlife (see below), affording views that are visible only by walking into this area in addition to the long distance views into Hampshire and the South Downs from Old Lane itself.

**C3 Is it desirable to designate this area as AONB due to its natural beauty?**

√ Yes

*Reasons:* The reasons, which I endorse, are clearly set out in the Consultation Document. However, these would apply also to the additional area proposed in response to C5 below, for which considerable substantiation was provided by the Dockenfield Parish Council in response to the original call for evidence. The Dockenfield Hills Extension, especially with the addition proposed in C5 below, would link the existing AONB with the South Downs National Park, thereby establishing an augmented and consolidated recognised area of natural beauty to which the public has considerable access. In particular:

* **Landscape quality**
* Geologically, the proposed extension lies on Gault clay
* River Wey on southernmost flank of area meanders through water meadows, and has formed some classic oxbow lakes that are visible from one of the footpaths across this additional area - features not seen with many rivers
* Landscape is well managed
* **Scenic quality**
* Gentle rolling nature of the countryside
* Area includes fields, mixed woodland, and established mixed hedgerows
* Views which encompass the River Wey
* Views extend E, SE, and S to woods and hills of South Downs National Park from Old Lane and augment the views from the higher ground in the heart of the village of Dockenfield. To the SW are further views, across countryside, of the South Downs National Park.
* **Relative Wildness**

Reasons set out in the Consultation Document for placing the southernmost boundary of the proposed extension along Old Lane rather than including the additional area south of Old Lane were:

1. the quarry at Grooms Farm
2. equestrian activities on Gum Hill

However, as regards this proposed additional area to the Dockenfield Hills AONB Extension, it is of central importance to note that:

* both the quarry and Gum Hill are in Hampshire.
* neither is visible from areas south of Old Lane.
* the quarry is to be fully restored by 31.12.24 as laid down in HCC Minerals and Waste Planning Decisions references: 30633/040 & 30633/041.

Furthermore, the additional area proposed here, as defined in C5, is no way different in character to the remainder of the Dockenfield Hills extension in the Consultation Document.

* **Relative tranquillity**
* Old Lane carries little traffic, and due to its narrowness and winding character, heavy vehicles are rarely to be seen and heard. The only other lane in the area is Heath Hill which is also very narrow and winding.
* Few houses
* No light industry
* One working farm on the southernmost boundary of the proposed additional area is hidden from sight. It is a family concern that has operated successfully within the current regulations in an environmentally-friendly manner since the 1950s; the farmer is keen to continue within this same framework. Sheep are kept in a few fields, and cows in others in the summer.
* Birdsong is the predominant sound heard by walkers
* The network of footpaths from the proposed extension area in the Consultation Document to several in this additional area contribute further to the sense of the area being one without much traffic, little habitation, and in the relative wild. These footpaths allow people to traverse and enjoy the area, including linking up to Cradle Lane and The Shipwrights Way. Duke of Edinburgh scheme participants and walking groups can often be seen using the footpaths.
* **Natural Heritage Features**

As a consequence of the landscape, air, and water quality, the relative wildness and tranquillity, this area is home to and supports considerable wildlife (see photographs). Seen more or less frequently in the proposed additional area, south of Old Lane, depending on time of year and the weather etc are many species of note which include:

***Mammals***

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ­­Mole | Stoat |
| Pygmy Shrew | Weasel |
| Common Shrew | Fox |
| Vole | Badger |
| Mouse | Roe Deer |
| Rat | Muntjac Deer |
| Rabbit | Otter |
| Squirrel | Bats of different species |
| Hedgehog |  |

***Birds***

*Red List***[[1]](#footnote-1),[[2]](#footnote-2)**

* Lesser Spotted Woodpecker
* Cuckoo
* Swift
* House martin
* Mistle thrush

*Amber List* 1,2

* Wood pigeon
* Mallard
* Pink Footed Goose
* Moorhen
* Transiting gulls
* Grey wagtail
* Sparrowhawk
* Tawny Owl
* Wren
* Dunnock
* Song thrush

*Others*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Canada Goose | Heron |
| Shelduck | Pheasant and Partridge |
| Mandarin Duck | Barn owl |
| Coot | Little owl |
| Jackdaw | Greater spotted woodpecker |
| Red Kite | Green woodpecker |
| Common buzzard | Nuthatch |
| Kestrel | Swallow |
| Jay | Dove |
| Magpie | Chiffchaff |
| Crow | Kingfisher |
| Rook | Wide variety of songbirds |

***Reptiles***

* Common Lizard
* Slow worm
* Grass snake
* Adder

***Amphibians***

* Frogs
* Newts (common and crested)
* Eels
* Toads

***Insects***

* Butterflies

Butterflies are worthy of particular note in the context of the proposed additional area south of Old Lane. Thanks to its distinctive blend of wildflower meadows, well-established hedgerows and native woodlands, Dockenfield is home to a high number of the UK's 59 species of butterflies and two regular migrants. One of these, the clouded yellow, is observed in the fields south of Old Lane where it makes the most of the late-flowering clover. This is a relatively unusual sight for Surrey – clouded yellows are more commonly found closer to the Hampshire coast.

Purple emperors – a rare butterfly that attracts national interest, with lepidopterist tourists visiting the neighbouring Alice Holt every July – are also regularly spotted in Old Lane and the surrounding area. The purple emperor dwells in the canopies of mature oaks and descends to the ground for short periods each day to feed, often on fox scat or dog mess. There have been multiple sightings at Great Holt and down Old Lane, where the butterfly is protected due to the generally quiet roads. As Matthew Oates, the UK's leading purple emperor expert writes in His Imperial Majesty (2020), this particular butterfly is greatly threatened by traffic. In fact, in 2022, a purple emperor was rescued from a Great Holt resident's open-top car, where it had flown into the footwell!

Further down Old Lane, brown hairstreaks have also been spotted, most likely present due to the unusual mix of ash and blackthorn. Butterfly Conservation reports that 80 per cent of butterflies in the UK have declined since the 1970s – Old Lane is currently important in attempts to buck that trend. Clearly it is as much the area to the south as to the north of Old Lane that provides such opportunities for butterflies.

In addition, frequently seen in this area are:

* moths
* beetles
* dragonflies
* damselflies

This wide range of wildlife stems from the supporting environmental features, namely:

* many veteran and notable oaks
* the River Wey and its oxbow lakes
* mixed woodland and hedgerows
* tributaries to Rivers Wey and Slea which flow respectively from Manor House through fields thereby creating very small wetlands areas, and along the proposed western boundary to this additional area
* Interconnectivity with hedgerows and areas of broadleaf (PAWS) native woodland extending from the ‘core’ Alice Holt forest with surrounds.
* **Cultural Heritage**

The boundary as drawn in the Consultation Document would omit the large country house of Great Holt and its gardens and grounds which together form an important historic heritage. This is a serious omission as regards the cultural heritage of the Dockenfield Hills for the following reasons:

1. House:

The estate has both cultural and architectural links of great interest to the area, in particular to Pierrepont in Frensham Village. Richard H Combe, of the wealthy brewing family Combe, commissioned the architect Norman Shaw to build Pierrepont in 1876-78. In 1904, Major Boyce Combe, one of Richard Combe’s 10 sons, set about a complete remodelling and enlargement of his farmhouse, Holt Hatch (now called *Flint House* on account of the extensive external use of flint), which dated from 1749. To do this, he engaged the local family of builders of three generations: Chuter and Sons which was active from the 1870s to the 1950s, had built Pierrepont, and was responsible for a number of distinguished properties in the area. The house was constructed in the Old English style, much the same as Pierrepoint House, influenced by the Arts and Crafts style. Great Holt was one of the first houses to have a large adjoining coach house for both horses and carriages, and for motor cars. Today two dwellings *The Granary,* and *The Coach House* have been constructed from the original coach house. The 1904 House is listed in the 1962 Architectural Guides *Buildings of England* by Sir Nicholas Pevsner which is a gazetteer of historic buildings of significance. It continues to be listed in the updated version on Surrey by O’Brien, Nairn, and Cherry, publ 2022.

The building today known as *The Little House* was located in the kitchen garden of the Great Holt estate and was used by the Combe family as an apple store. It is possible that the orchard visible from Old Lane and attached to *Holt Farm,* a little further westward along Old Lane*,* was part of the kitchen garden.

Major Boyce Combe remained in Great Holt until his death in 1939.

*The Old Convent* is a large building in the wider Great Holt grounds which is partially visible from Old Lane. It was built in the 1950s for the Catholic Order of St Teresa to accommodate young women who were ‘under the care’ of the nuns. A graveyard used by the Order is on land associated with the old coach house properties. The Order also built a chapel, today divided into dwellings known as *Rose Chapel* and *Belfry House* (the belfry no longer has a bell but is visible from a considerable distance).

1. Gardens and grounds

Great Holt gardens and grounds were, and still are, an important aspect of Great Holt. Considerable care was taken in their location to take advantage of the views to the south of Old Lane, on the hillside immediately on the southern edge of Alice Holt Forest, exploiting to the full the beautiful untrammelled view across the landscape to the south. A number of pedunculate oaks, now veteran and notable, were incorporated around the boundary of the grounds along with framing groves of Scots pines, also now veterans. Within the boundary, three garden terraces to the south were created, following the natural line of the hill. Today, the approach to the main drive to the property is framed by mature chestnuts, and one area of the Great Holt grounds is being rewilded; already orchids and other wildflowers are growing and violets have spread into the surrounding hedgerows.

A public footpath emerges from the Alice Holt Forest, crosses Old Lane and continues through the grounds of Great Holt. The footpath affords good views of the large oaks and pines, the lowest of the Great Holt garden terraces, and the house itself. This footpath leads over fields in Hampshire to the South Downs National Park, or back up to the western flank of the Dockenfield Hills proposed extension. *See photos*

**C4 Is there any other important information that we should include in our assessment of the desirability of designating this area?**

√ Yes

*Reasons:* The reasons for the proposed area are clearly set out in the Consultation Document, which I endorse. As regards the additional area proposed in response to C5 below:

* It satisfies the AONB technical criterion, as laid out in C3
* Its special qualities are described in response to C3 above
* As a small – yet crucial - addition, it would be unlikely to require any management mechanisms, powers and duties over and above those needed for the Dockenfield Hills Extension Area as defined in the CD.

**C5 Do you agree with the proposed boundary of this extension?**

√ I wish to suggest an alternative boundary.

*Reasons:* The reasons for this are set out in the responses to other questions in Sections C1-C4 above.

The map below illustrates the proposed alternative which uses established hedges and the River Wey as a clear southern boundary to the proposed Dockenfield Hills extension. It allows the inclusion of the valuable area south of Old Lane whilst avoiding sections of the County boundary which are not identifiable on the ground.

**This map is identical to that proposed by the Dockenfield Parish Council. The photographs to support this boundary are attached to the Parish Council’s submission.**

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**Photographs illustrating features of alternative boundary area south of Old Lane**

A picture containing grass, outdoor, water, landscape

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View from Old Lane looking south to River Wey (mid left hand side)

A picture containing tree, outdoor, plant, shade

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Winter view from Old Lane, near Temple Pool, southeast over River Wey

A picture containing tree, outdoor, plant, forest

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Area south of Old Lane, looking from Great Holt eastwards

A picture containing tree, outdoor, plant, willow

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Small tributary to River Wey from Manor House southwards

A picture containing tree, outdoor, plant, forest

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River Wey, from footpath that runs south from Old Lane across fields close to Manor House

A road with trees on the side

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Looking southwest along Old Lane

A picture containing grass, tree, outdoor, green

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Eastward view from just above footpath that runs along Great Holt boundary

A picture containing outdoor, grass, tree, sky

Description automatically generated

View of Great Holt, also showing belfry of The Old Convent, from just above footpath that runs along Great Holt boundary

A group of goats in a fenced in pasture

Description automatically generated with low confidence

View of footpath that runs along Great Holt boundary.

A bird in the grass

Description automatically generated with low confidence

 Young cuckoo in Great Holt

A person climbing a mountain

Description automatically generated with low confidence

Tawny owl in tree south of Old Lane - photo taken with night camera

A butterfly on a leaf

Description automatically generated

Purple Emperor butterfly in Great Holt

1. British Trust of Ornithology classification [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Seen within last two years [↑](#footnote-ref-2)