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VEOLIA ERF PLANT - HCC 33619/007

Tract of Land to the northward of the A31, north east of Alton

Valued Landscape

Land to the southward of the A31 north east of Alton (the Site), currently occupied by an MRF plant, is proposed for an ERF plant.

CPRE Hampshire has now had the opportunity to make an assessment of the Site in the context of a "valued" landscape which should be protected according to national planning guidance. This assessment has regard to:

- Hampshire Integrated Landscape Character Assessment ("HILCA")
- East Hampshire Landscape Character Assessment ("EHLCA")
- a study of criteria used by Inspectors on appeal in deciding whether appeal sites are "valued" landscapes
- our own observations

Assessment of landscape character and physical distinctiveness

The Site is situated about 1 kilometre to the north-east of the settlement edge of Holybourne and some 4 kilometres from the centre of Alton. It is a narrow piece of land between the A31 running to the northward side and the Alton London railway line to the southward. On land immediately to the west of the Site is a small oil pumping station and depot. Beyond the railway line is the River Wey, which runs essentially parallel. Some 1.25 kilometres to the east-south-east of the Site lies the closest point of the South Downs National Park, a nationally designated landscape.

The Site lies centrally within LCA 3f - Wey Valley in HILCA and LCA 4B - Northern Wey Valley in EHLCA. The Wey Valley is described as a broad valley with gently rising valley sides through which the River Wey flows. It is characterised by a distinct flat valley floor with permanent pasture extending over the River Wey. Large to medium scaled arable fields cloak the open valley sides. Woodland in the upper valley slopes form wooded skylines in places. The valley side to the north is characterised in places by strong chalk bluffs and incised coombes.

As well as the undoubted attraction of the unspoiled chalk river itself, with its history of use for milling with associated mill ponds and weirs, there are many historical features and buildings within the Wey Valley, such as converted mill houses and a number of large and historic houses at points along the northern side of the valley and built to look south over the River Wey.

The Valley has historically been an important transport corridor and is traversed by the main A31 road and the Alton to Waterloo railway line. St Swithun's Way long distance footpath from Winchester to Farnham, roughly following the route of the Pilgrims' Way, runs through this landscape some 0.5 kilometre to the northward of the A31. This landscape is therefore appreciated and valued by more people than just the local residents.

In one of his famous Rural Rides, the most famous local inhabitant, the reformer, writer and MP William Cobbett (1763-1835), born and raised in Farnham, includes the following: "The vale between Alton and Farnham is the finest ten miles in England. Here is a river with fine meadows on each side of it, and with rising grounds having some hop-gardens and some pretty woods". The renowned



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Selborne resident and naturalist, Gilbert White (1720-1793), also wrote in his journals about the landscape in admiring terms.

Specifically in the vicinity of the Site the northern valley side leading up from the A31 is cloaked by medium sized arable fields screened by mature wide hedgerows with mixed vegetation and many large hedgerow trees leading up to chalk outcrops which extend south-eastwards, notably Holybourne Down and Brockham Hill. These are separated by an incised coombe with steep valley sides. Holybourne Down, with the incised coombe and similar mature hedgerows leading across to Brockham Hill, is an outstanding example of chalk downland landscape within a very tranquil location. Holybourne Down at 225 metres above sea level is one of the highest points in Hampshire.

The lower part of the valley consists of a rolling and undulating landscape with woodlands, field and mature hedgerow screens. It is undeveloped other than at Bonhams Farm, a Grade 2* listed building with historic outbuildings and, at the western end, the settlement of Holybourne at the bottom of the valley adjoining the railway line. There is a sense of enclosure and tranquillity is little disturbed by the A31, railway line, or the existing MRF plant. Roofs of the village of Holybourne are visible in some aspects but do not intrude.

Brockham Hill Lane, leading into Holybourne, and the lane leading from Stowell Cottage into Upper Froyle, are good examples of narrow rural lanes, sunken in places and banked by mature hedgerows, representative of historic lanes in this part of Hampshire.

This tract of landscape to the northward of the A31 is within the Shaldon/Froyle part of the Downland with Valleys and Ridges LCA, assessed as an Area of Special Landscape Quality as proposed in a Report by RPS Watson to East Hampshire District Council dated 8 December 1994, based on its steep sided valleys and ridges, wooded horizon enhancing sense of enclosure and as being especially representative of this Character Area. This assessment is as valid today as it was in 1994. It is also within an area of Low Landscape Capacity in the East Hampshire Landscape Capacity Study of September 2018.

Assessment of public experience of the landscape

From vantage points along Brockham Hill Lane there is a fine and extensive long distance view to the south-east from this chalk outcrop over this distinctive landscape, the A31 and the River Wey to the South Downs National Park.



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This long distance view (see photo above) is of high quality and essentially uninterrupted by built development other than the existing MRF plant with a height of 15 metres; but surrounded by trees and with a light green roof the intrusion of this building is limited and the eye is taken over it to the far side of the valley. The A31 and railway line are hidden by trees.

This view also takes in the fine chalk downland to the east leading up to the high point Holybourne Down (see photo below)



From the permissive bridleway leading up Holybourne Down the long distance view extends further round to the west (see photos below). Yet the Town of Alton to the south-west is hidden other than for a newly constructed housing estate to the north of the town which is visible at long distance.



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Holybourne Down offers a high quality chalk downland landscape in a very tranquil setting (see photo below) with a much used permissive bridleway leading within open downland to woodland at the top of the down.



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Descending the lane leading from Stowell Cottage into Upper Froyle there are fine views over the bordering hedgerows across the valley, culminating at the end of the lane in a superb view of the listed Grade 2*Jacobean manor house of Froyle Park. These are visible from a car as well as on foot and bicycle. See photos below





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Lower down the valley, the experience from this length of the important and much used long distance footpath, St Swithun's Way, is of an attractive rolling and undulating landscape with woodlands, field and mature hedgerow screens. Views from the field to the east of Round Wood are of attractive countryside looking to the north east, and also to the south east over the MRF Plant to the other side of the Wey valley. To the west of Round Wood there are fine views up to the chalk outcrops to the north west. Emerging from Round Wood there is a substantial log seat positioned to allow members of the public to enjoy this view. Tranquillity is little disturbed by the A31, railway line or the existing MRF plant. A line of medium sized pylons which crosses north to south detracts a little when crossing the field to the west of West End Farm, but is quickly left behind. See photos below



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This part of the route of St Swithun's Way is undeveloped other than at West End, where there is a house with flower farm providing public access from St Swithun's Way to a lake, picnic area and farm shop, with a good view over the MRF plant to the south-west, although here the A31 is intrusive. See photos below



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Accordingly, taking account of

- the attractive and distinctive landscape with a fine long distance view over the Wey Valley to the South Downs National Park and to the west over Alton
- the high quality chalk landscape in the upper part of the valley, and overall sense of tranquillity
- the high quality public experience of this landscape from public and permissive rights of way and the St Swithun's Way long distance path
- the important contribution of this tract of landscape to the characteristics identified in LCA 3f - Wey Valley in HILCA and LCA 4b - Northern Wey Valley in EHLCA,

CPRE Hampshire considers that the tract of land running northwards from the A31 in the vicinity of the Site has demonstrable attributes which raises it above the ordinary, such that it is a "valued landscape" to which NPPF paragraph 170(a) applies and requires to be protected.

Paragraph 4B.20 of the EHLCA states that the overall management objective for LCA 4b is "to conserve the tranquil, natural character of the Northern Wey Valley, and the individual identity of the small villages set on the gravel terrace above the floodplain. The valley should provide an open rural landscape between the towns of Alton and Farnham. The character of the enclosing valley sides, particularly the downland to the north of the Wey, which form the backdrop to the valley, should also be conserved."

CPRE Hampshire South Downs & Central Planning Group

21 July 2020