



Location and Context

The *Upland River Valleys - Ayrshire* Landscape Character Type occurs in five places in Ayrshire, focused to the central eastern extents of the region in East Ayrshire. The rim of hills which surrounds the Ayrshire agricultural lowlands is cut by a series of medium sized river valleys - the Doon, Nith, Glenmuir, Ayr and Irvine. Although each has its own distinctive character, they share a number of common characteristics, largely as a result of their scale and the strong sense of enclosure provided by surrounding uplands.

Key Characteristics

- Varying river valley landform with broad open sections which contrast with steeper valley slopes and narrow, more enclosed valleys.
- Varied underlying geology which includes sandstone, millstone, coal measures and a volcanic plug, Loudoun Hill, which forms a distinctive landmark from the Upper Irvine Valley.
- Characterised by moorland vegetation, with increasing amounts of improved pasture on lower slopes and valley floors.
- Confined landscape scale.
- Together with adjacent moorlands, these valleys often provide the focus for open-cast coal mining activity.
- A focus for industrial settlement in all but the Upper Nithsdale valley, where settlement is scarce, confined to farmsteads on the lower valley slopes.
- Often act as a focus for transport routes.
- Open views in the broad valley sections, changing to quite enclosed and intimate views within narrow sections.

Landscape Character Description

Landform

The Upper Doon Valley runs from south-east to north-west through an area of coal measures, limestone and millstone grit. The valley is comparatively broad in its upper

sections with an open flat floodplain near Dalmellington, but narrows as the river flows north to Patna. The river itself meanders back and forth across a narrowing floodplain which is wet in its upper reaches and pastoral lower down.

The section of Upper Nithsdale lying within Ayrshire is underlain by sandstones and millstone grit. Glacial erosion has over-deepened the valley, creating a distinctive u-shaped valley between steeply rising hills to the north and south. The river meanders freely across a broad, flat valley bottom.

The Glenmuir Valley runs from north-east to south-west, draining Airds Moss and the moorlands to the south of the Ayr. To the east the topography of the valley is enclosed by steeper hills and the valley broadens out as it flows west. The underlying geology is mainly formed by sedimentary formations.

The Upper Ayr Valley can be sub-divided into sections. Between the Ayrshire boundary at Glenbuck and a point about three kilometres downstream of Smallburn, the valley follows an important fault line which runs parallel to the Southern Uplands Fault. Here the valley is broad and open, enlarged by glacial erosion, and the valley slopes rise to the gently rolling hills of the Plateau Moorland landscape type. Below Smallburn, the river turns north, leaving the fault line valley (which is subsequently drained by the Bellow Water) to flow westwards through a much smaller scale valley incised into the rising moorland. The valley which is about 30 metres deep and just 500 metres wide has steep eroding slopes with hanging birch and hazel woodlands.

The Upper Irvine Valley follows another fault line and has a more pronounced v-shape than other valleys, with steeper valley slopes and a narrower floodplain. It also has more complex knolls and deeply incised side valleys. At the same time, the valley is more settled and more wooded, creating a distinctive variation in landscape character. Loudoun Hill, a prominent, craggy volcanic plug at the head of the valley is a distinctive landmark, visible from much of the valley, along with the hills of Cairn Table, Auchenyroy and Corsencon.

Landcover

Many of these upland valleys are characterised by moorland vegetation where farming activity is confined to sheep grazing. On better lower slopes, and valley floors, there are some fields of improved pasture, enclosed by hawthorn hedges with occasional hedgerow trees. Areas such as the Upper Ayr valley are characterised by many outgrown beech hedges. In places the structure of field boundaries is deteriorating and post and wire fences are used to supplement or even replace gappy hedges. Over time, this will result in the weakening of the contrast between the enclosed lower slopes and the open moorland slopes above.

The extent of deciduous woodland varies between the valleys. While the upper Doon and much of the upper Ayr valleys have little broadleaf woodland, the Irvine valley in particular is characterised by extensive woodlands associated with designed landscapes. Maintenance of these woodlands is important for the conservation of landscape character. Semi-natural woodland also makes a significant contribution where it occurs to any extent. The principal examples of such woodlands are along the middle section of the Ayr valley where broadleaf

woodland clothes the steep slopes enclosing the river. In places, this woodland appears to be in decline, suggesting that grazing pressures may be preventing natural regeneration. Again, these woodlands make an important contribution to the valley's landscape character.

Coniferous woodlands are also a feature of several of these valleys, particularly where more extensive coniferous forest on surrounding uplands extends into the valley. Elsewhere, coniferous forest is much more limited in extent, often forming shelter belts or geometric areas of woodland.

The upland river valleys, and the moorlands immediately fringing them, provide the focus for open-cast coal mining activity. This activity is greatest in the Doon Valley, near Dalmellington, and the Glenmuir and upper Ayr Valleys.

Settlement

On the Upper Doon Valley the occurrence of coal, limestone and ironstone deposits has had a significant influence on the landscape. Early exploitation led to the development of coal mines, iron works, spoil tips, mineral railway, and the industrial settlements of Dalmellington, Waterside and Patna. The remains of 19th and early 20th Century industrial activity form a layer in the valley's landscape, representing one phase of settlement and land use. Modern coal extraction, however, concentrated on the hills above Dalmellington, takes the form of open-cast mining. This is of a very different scale to that in the past, and changes the landscape over a significant area.

In the main these valleys are well settled and accommodate major 'A' roads, although Upper Nithsdale settlement is scarce, confined to farmsteads sites on the lower valley slopes. However, the valley is important for communication, providing a lowland corridor between the Ayrshire lowlands and the Solway coast.

Though of a smaller scale than the other *Upland River Valleys - Ayrshire*, the Glenmuir Valley has acted as a focus for industrial development and settlement. The area is scarred by many bings and spoil tips, these are mostly small scale and reflect the historic exploitation of the more accessible coal seams. The settlements of Auchinleck, Holmhead and Cumnock are sited at the point where the upland valley gives way to the more pastoral basin. These settlements are predominantly 20th Century in character, and are often quite prominent features in the open landscape.

Patterns of land use and settlement also differ between these two sections of the Upper Ayr Valley. The broader upper section has a long industrial history, based on the deposits of coal, limestone and iron ore. The 19th Century saw extensive exploitation of these minerals with pits, iron and steel works, railway lines and settlements such as Smallburn and Muirkirk. This industrial activity has left a legacy of bings, embankments and other relics which form an important part of the historic landscape. While the pits and steelworks have closed, recent open-cast coal workings between Glenbuck and Muirkirk are apparent.

Set within the Upper Irvine Valley are a series of small industrial towns (Newmilns, Greenholm and Darvel) which grew up around the textile industry, particularly lace making, some of which continues today. These tend to be linear settlements, strung along the main

road which follows the valley, their townscapes dominated by churches and mill buildings. Sand and gravel deposits are being exploited at the head of the valley where the A71 climbs up onto the moorland. The A71 likely follows the route of a Roman road as it passes Loudoun Hill. The site of the battle of Loudoun Hill, fought in 1307, lies nearby.

Perception

These upland valleys often act as a focus for settlement and transport corridors and have been exploited for mineral extraction. This developed character can contrast with the more remote, rural areas within the valleys where simple rural practices prevail. The landform can also add to the sense of contrast with more open views obtainable in the broader valley sections changing to views which are quite enclosed and intimate within the narrow valley sections. Open, elevated views can be gained from settlement sited on the valley sides and from the A76, A70 and A71 roads aligned through these landscapes.

This is one of 389 Landscape Character Types identified at a scale of 1:50 000 as part of a national programme of Landscape Character Assessment republished in 2019.

The area covered by this Landscape Character Type was originally included in the Ayrshire (Land Use Consultants), published 1998.