



Location and Context

The *Foothills - Ayrshire* Landscape Character Type occurs in a band across southern Ayrshire, focused to the south. The Landscape Character Type comprises a series of hills which form the transition between the higher *Plateau Moorland - Ayrshire*, *Southern Uplands - Ayrshire* and *Rugged Upland - Ayrshire* to the south, and the more sheltered and settled Ayrshire Lowlands to the north. The Foothills cover a large area, extending eastwards from the coast between the Stinchar Valley and Brown Carrick Hill as far as the Upper Nith Basin at New Cumnock.

Key Characteristics

- Dissected landform of incised valleys cut between rounded ridges, frequently having a slightly conical form with long shoulder slopes, and plateaux occasionally rising to undramatic summits.
- Underlain by red sandstones in the west and coal measures in the east.
- Variety of landcover types: lower slopes typically have a pastoral character; with increasing altitude the proportion of rougher grazing rises; and summits are dominated by moorland vegetation.
- Swathes of dark green coniferous forest cover many of the rounded peaks and descend on to the lower slopes.
- The eastern part of this area, comprising the south eastern part of the Ayrshire Coalfield, has a concentration of large open-cast coal mines.
- Scatter of villages and farms in the northern parts of the Landscape Character Type, and very little settlement in more upland areas to the south and east.
- Remnants of historic settlement patterns still evident in areas that are unsettled and uncultivated.
- Enclosed nature of forested areas, with their foreshortened views, can create a remote, isolated feel.
- Simple, largely undeveloped landscape, with foothills often providing scenic backdrops to the settled valleys which surround them.

Landscape Character Description

Landform

The *Foothills – Ayrshire* Landscape Character Type is cut by a number of principal valleys, including the Water of Girvan, the Doon and the Stinchar. A larger number of minor valleys cut into the foothills, creating a dissected landform of incised valleys between rounded ridges and plateaux. The ground occasionally rises to undramatic summits reaching 300 metres, which have a slightly conical form with long shoulder slopes.

The foothills are underlain by red sandstones in the west and coal measures in the east. The south westerly orientation of fault lines and the distribution of geology have strongly influenced the topographic patterns, particularly in the western and southern parts of the landscape type. The line of the South Upland Fault Ridge is echoed in the alignment of the Stinchar Valley, while further north the distribution of sedimentary rocks has been influenced by tectonic movements and also has a south-westerly orientation determining the alignment of the Water of Girvan.

Landcover

The Foothills exhibit a variety of landcover types, tending to reflect comparatively minor differences in elevation or exposure. The lower slopes typically have a pastoral character with medium sized fields, enclosed by fences, hedges (many of which have become gappy or outgrown) and sometimes drystone dykes. With increasing altitude the proportion of rougher grazing rises, with the summits dominated by moorland vegetation with occasional drystone dyke boundaries, or extensive areas of coniferous forest.

Swathes of dark green coniferous forest cover many of the rounded peaks and descend on to the lower slopes. These are relatively dynamic landscapes, which change with the different stages of forest rotation, from clear-felled areas to replanting and mature trees. Many forests have deciduous fringes, informal edges and feathering on high slopes. Several forests have high recreational value, with tourism facilities and waymarked trails.

Settlement

The eastern part of this area, comprising the south eastern part of the Ayrshire Coalfield, has been affected by past and present coal mining. Historically, deep mining predominated, albeit often on a relatively small scale. The area running between Dalmellington, Waterside and Rankinston on the eastern side of the Doon Valley has many relics of coal, limestone and iron ore extraction including bings, inclines and disused railways. The landscape change brought by more recent open-cast workings found above Dalmellington and west of New Cumnock (comprising excavation, coal storage areas, haul roads, site compounds and access roads) is considerably greater than that associated with the smaller scale operations which took place in the 19th Century and the first half of the 20th Century.

Modern settlement within this landscape type is generally very limited as farms and villages tend to be sited in the more hospitable valleys and lowlands. The interior is not readily visible from public roads. The more upland areas to the south and east are generally unsettled. The principal exception is the string of isolated settlements found along the B741 between Dalmellington and New Cumnock. Sited in a shallow valley between the Southern Uplands and the low summits of the Foothills, many of these settlements are industrial in origin,

associated with the pits and coal workings which today are visible as little more than grassy bings linked by disused railway embankments. Many of these settlements having declined with the closure of pits, and isolated rows of workers houses and school houses now appear slightly out of place in this otherwise open, upland landscape.

Building material reflects both the variations in underlying geology and the era of development. While sandstones and harder, often whitewashed, building stones predominate in the west, in the east more modern and industrial materials such as brick, white render and pantiles or concrete tiles are more common, reflecting the industry-related development that took place until the middle of the 20th Century.

The remnants of historic settlement patterns, based upon rig and furrow fields enclosed by turf dykes and centred on large individual farmsteads are still evident in areas that are unsettled and uncultivated today. Many of the place names associated with these farmsteads are still visible on Ordnance Survey maps today. An example is Benquhat located at about 400 metres above Waterside in the Doon valley. The elevation of such field systems indicates that they date back to the periods of milder climate that prevailed around the 16th Century. Occasionally, breaks in the coniferous forest cover reveal old stone enclosures and forts. These surviving examples illustrate the pattern of land holding that would have prevailed across much of Ayrshire. The area around Loch Doon also displays evidence of more recent activity in the form of extensive development for a military training area during the First World War.

Perception

Outwith areas which have been affected by coal mining this is a simple, relatively undeveloped landscape. Although large scale coniferous forests clearly reveal the influence of man on the landscape, the enclosed nature of the forest and foreshortened views can create a remote, isolated feel. Furthermore wind farm development, especially in the foothills to the south of the Water of Girvan (which includes the operational Hadyard Hill Wind Farm), has altered the character of some locations within this Landscape Character Type.

The *Foothills - Ayrshire* often provide scenic backdrops to the settled valleys which surround them. Views from the foothills tend to be long distance and panoramic and reveal the contrast between the foothills, which are more remote in character, and the surrounding settled valleys and lowlands. The foothills near the coast also offer dramatic, elevated views over the Firth of Clyde with Ailsa Craig providing a prominent focal point. Larger areas, such as west of New Cumnock, have a visually contained inner core, not visible from public roads and settlement in the surrounding area.

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.