



### Location and Context

South of the Highland Boundary Fault in Tayside lies broad lowland valleys or straths which comprise the *Broad Valley Lowlands – Tayside* Landscape Character Type in Tayside. They are broad, settled lowland agricultural valleys, with fertile soils. These share a range of common characteristics which set them apart from other valleys and glens. There are, however, significant variations in landscape character within this type, primarily relating to topography, and these are described below. The five areas of *Broad Valley Lowlands - Tayside* are:

- Strathmore;
- Strathearn;
- Strathallan;
- The Lower South and North Esk river valleys;
- The Pow Water Valley between the Gask Ridge and Keillour Forest.

### Key Characteristics

- Broad straths formed by glacial erosion, loosely enclosed by the foothills and massifs to the north, and lower local hill ridges to the south.
- Overriding southwest to northeast orientation.
- Undersized, misfit rivers which typically from adjacent low elevations do not read as dominant landscape features.
- Complex local topography caused by glacial deposition, including outwash terraces, eskers and dry valleys.
- Distinctive red soils and red building stone, contribute to a colourful mosaic of large fields particularly in the earlier months when crops are immature.
- Influence of large estates, particularly in terms of mature woodland and policies defined field boundaries and enclosed estate houses.
- Dominance of arable and root crops, in large fields typically enclosed by post and wire fencing, which contribute to the overriding horizontal landform and large to medium scale. Some specialist crops such as fruit orchards and bulb fields are

adding diversification, with expansion of highly visible poly-tunnels an increasingly common feature.

- Tree and hedge loss weakening landscape character increasing openness of landscape, and increasingly ineffective in mitigating the dust bowls in dry months
- Significant network of roads running through landscape, with main trunk roads including the A9 and A90 roads running along the straths linking a number of large towns;
- Well-settled landscape with strong hierarchy of settlement types from large towns, to small villages, located within a well-populated agricultural landscape.
- Rich historic landscapes with features including standing stones, hillforts, Roman camps and medieval castles and tower houses.
- Tall vertical structures are prominent in this landscape and adjacent elevated hills including views to pylon lines both within and on the adjacent foothills, and a small numbers of clusters and small wind farms. Single large commercial turbines are located infrequently along the strath itself.
- Wide, panoramic views across the breadth of the strath, running along and up to the enclosing hills. In particular there are unrivalled views from Strathmore up to the foothills and uplands of the Grampian Mountains to the north.

## **Landscape Character Description**

### *Landform*

The *Broad Valley Lowlands - Tayside* share a common geological structure, based on the broad band of Old Red Sandstone that runs south-west to north-east through the heart of Tayside. Bounded by harder schists and grits to the north and lavas and tufts to the south, and a ready lowered by downfaulting, this soft rock was easily eroded by the ice sheets which extended across the region during period of glaciation. These created much wider and deeper valleys than the scale of existing rivers might suggest. At the end of the last Ice Age, retreating ice sheets deposited a considerable amount of drift within these valleys, much of which was further modified by meltwater flows before or around the ice. This created the complex local topography of outwash terraces, eskers and dry valleys that occur in many places today. Much of the glacial material was locally derived and has given rise to the distinctive red soils that are visible when fields are ploughed. Brighter reds tend to be found further north and east.

### *Landcover*

The fertile nature of these lowland areas, and the consequent dominance of agriculture, means that woodland is limited in extent. A characteristic of this period of enclosure was the planting of many trees (oak, beech, chestnut and ash) along field boundaries. These would have given shelter and provided a source of building timber and firewood. Up to 200 years later, where they survive these mature (or even over mature) trees, although limited in extent, make an important contribution to the rich character of the *Broad Valley Lowlands - Tayside*. The large estates, with their baronial mansions and castles, designed landscapes, pleasure grounds, ornamental woodlands, avenues and policies make an equally important contribution. Native birch woodland is found on the pockets of unimproved land within the straths and geometric coniferous forestry is planted on less fertile Strathallan.

### *Settlement*

Some of the valley floors have been rich agricultural areas since the Neolithic when farming was first introduced to Scotland. The valley of the North Esk contains the massive Capo Long Barrow which survives as an upstanding feature. Other monuments such as henges, standing stones and burial mounds are widely distributed from Brechin in the north-east to Dunning in the south-west, demonstrating the range and extent of human occupation between roughly 4000 and 1000 BC.

The valleys also contain extensive evidence, though mostly buried or visible only as cropmarks, for settlement and farming from the Middle Bronze Age and Iron Age (about 1800BC to AD400), in the form of enclosures, roundhouses and soutterains. The soutterains in particular represent evidence for the storage of agricultural surpluses. The valleys were also long-lived communication routes in the past, as they are today. The Romans passed through on campaign, leaving evidence in the form of roads, forts and camps, from Ardoch in the south-west to Stracathro in the north-east.

However, some parts of the present landscape have been substantially modified since medieval times. Parts of Strathmore had comprised extensive areas of rough grazing, scrub woodland and unproductive wetland. The process of draining and improving the land was begun in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century when groups of monks came to the area. One of the principal centres was Coupar Angus where a major Cistercian Abbey was founded in 1164, and many of the moors and mires were brought into agricultural use over subsequent centuries. The process of improvement entered a new phase with the parliamentary enclosure of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries, creating the structure of rectilinear fields that are evident today. More and more land has been brought into production. Flood defences have been constructed along rivers, allowing arable cultivation to spread onto the floodplain. The fertility of the soil, allied to favourable climatic conditions have favoured the cultivation of cereals, oil seed rape, soft fruit and potatoes. Many of the farms in the straths now include a number of very large modern sheds which tower over the older farm buildings and which are often visible over a considerable distance. The 19<sup>th</sup> Century also saw the rationalisation of estates, including the creation of new villages to accommodate farm workers, and the arrival of the railways. Medieval market towns such as Kirriemuir, Coupar Angus and Forfar experienced growth during this period, reflected in their inner suburbs of Victorian terraces and villas. Agriculture has continued to develop and dominates within this landscape character type.

Most development within the lowland straths is concentrated within existing settlements. These include historic medieval market towns such as Rattray, Forfar and Brechin with its striking Cathedral round tower of c1100. These towns grew at the crossroads of important routes and often provide gateways to upland areas. There are also smaller agricultural villages, many of which were established in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries following enclosure, agricultural improvement and the arrival of the railways. Many of these settlements are closely associated with the surrounding landscape, both in terms of the materials that are used (typically red sandstones among older buildings), their vernacular style and their market function. Development outside these settlements is comparatively limited, confined to farmsteads and a scatter of agricultural dwellings. More recent developments on the edge of settlements (for example that to the south of Glamis) tend to owe little to local tradition, often comprising low density estates of houses built in a style that can be found throughout the

UK. There are many large historic houses and designed landscapes, including examples such as the House of Dun overlooking Montrose Basin, and Glamis Castle.

The lowland straths include substantial deposits of fluvio-glacial material, some of which has been exploited to provide material for building. Sites currently being worked include those to the west of Auchterarder in Strathallan (where a series of lochans have been formed in worked-out areas) and near Kingsmuir, immediately to the east of Forfar. Although these workings have a local landscape impact, their broader effect is limited.

Several of the Tayside straths incorporate major roads which enjoy comparatively level routed through the *Broad Valley Lowlands - Tayside*. The A9 is the primary route and is dual carriageway for much of its length, running along Strathallan and Strathearn, while the A94 runs through Strathmore. The large scale of the straths means that the impact of these major roads is less than it might otherwise have been. The broad curves and sinuous alignments seem to echo the generous proportions of the landscape. However, the road structures (including embankments, cuttings and overbridges) are more obviously visible in the lowland agricultural landscape. The noise and movement of traffic using these routes have a major influence on the character of the local landscape in areas adjoining the roads.

There are several single, large scale wind turbines within these landscapes which form point features which are widely visible across the broad valley landscapes.

#### Variation in Landscape Character

It is in Strathmore that the distinctive character of the landscape is most evident. From a distance, the area appears as a very broad, flat-bottomed valley enclosed by the Highland Foothills to the north and the rising sweep of the Sidlaws' north-facing dipslope to the south. Where estate planting survives, for example around Glamis, the strath landscape is rich and textured and particularly colourful during spring and autumn. Where the trees have been lost it is an open and expansive landscape of rectangular fields punctuated with a scatter of large farmsteads. The landscape of the strath contrasts strongly with neighbouring areas of upland, particularly where the woodland structure has survived.

Strathearn, extending from Crieff eastwards to the Bridge of Earn has a similar structure to Strathmore. To the south it is enclosed by the steep slopes of the Ochils, while to the north the Gask Ridge separates it from the valley of the Pow Water. There are a number of significant differences, however. The first is scale. Strathearn is considerably narrower and less extensive. Furthermore, the River Earn is a more evident feature in the landscape, its broad meanders swinging back and forth across the floodplain. The strath also accommodates a railway and the main A9 dual carriageway. Where the woodland structure is thin, the road and its traffic are very visible. Overall, however, the strath retains a rich, well-wooded agricultural landscape, particularly towards the east.

Strathallan extends from Greenloaning towards Auchterarder. Although the scale is similar to that of Strathearn, the landscape is very much more open, forming a shallow valley between the lowland hills to the north and the smooth, largely unwooded slopes of the Ochils to the south. Arable cultivation predominates and woodland is generally limited to dense geometric blocks of conifers. In this large-scale, open landscape, this woodland appears sculptural,

almost comparable to fields of crops. Along the floor of the strath, the local topography is complex, resulting from extensive fluvio glacial deposits. Drumlin fields create a landscape of hummocks and small basins. Areas of glacial sands and gravels have been quarried, leaving a network of small lochs.

The Pow water valley, lies between the Gask Ridge and the lowland hills of the Keillour Forest. It is a shallow, small scale agricultural valley, with field and woodland patterns similar to those of the larger lowland valleys. Much of the valley floor has been drained to provide pastures and arable land.

The valleys of the Rivers South Esk and North Esk form a broad area of lowland to the south of the Highland Boundary Fault and enclosed to the south by the high ground to the east of Forfar. Although sometimes included within the broad definition of Strathmore to the west, this area drains eastwards and is separated from Strathmore by a low watershed around Kirriemuir. More significantly, perhaps, this area is distinguished by its smaller scale, high proportion of woodland (both broad-leaf and coniferous) and by the well-defined river corridors of the two Esks. The rivers are identified by lines of riverside trees, and by inner terraces. They are separated by a low ridge. Like other straths, the valleys are in both pastoral and arable use.



This is one of 390 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 Tayside LCA (Land Use Consultants), published 1999.