LCA 3  Howgill Fells

Yorkshire Dales National Park - Landscape Character Assessment
LCA 3 Howgill Fells

Key characteristics

- Massive, wild, open, and inaccessible upland, composed of Silurian rock overlain by moorland and rock screes.
- Smooth, distinctive, well defined closely spaced ridges fan out from dome shaped fells to create long, steep sided dales and steep rocky gullies with occasional steep, tumbling waterfalls.
- Steeply incised gills cut through the overall smooth form of the fells, creating sharp contrasts in landform.
- Virtually treeless; where trees occur, they cling to occasional exposed rock edges in gills and rocky valley sides.
- Expansive and exposed, the moorland provides largely unenclosed grazing for sheep and wild ponies.
- Strong sense of remoteness and tranquillity - almost total absence of roads and settlement.
- The smooth, deeply folded form of the uplands play host to a pattern of light and shade.
- Panoramic and very extensive views from the fell tops.

Numbered photographs illustrate specific key natural, cultural and perceptual features in the Howgill Fells LCA (see page 7)
Landscape context

These unusually shaped hills are formed from an outcrop of sequences of sandstones, siltstones and mudstones which contrast markedly with the igneous formations of the Cumbria High Fells to the west and the limestones of the Yorkshire Dales to the east and south east. The primary rock type is a hard sandstone, but the rocks all possess a similar resistance to erosion which gives rise to the smooth, rounded shape that is so characteristic of these fells. Ice scouring during the last glaciation has emphasised the evenness of the slopes.

The bulk of the Howgills, as well as Middleton and Barbon Fell to the south, are of Silurian age (430-415 million years old), and some 60 million years older than the Carboniferous rocks that make up most of the Yorkshire Dales. The most important feature of the geology of the area is the Dent Fault, which is aligned along parts of the Rawthey Valley and Barbondale between Kirkby Stephen and Kirkby Lonsdale, forms the physical division between the two contrasting types of scenery – the smooth flanked Howgills and the horizontal limestone scars of the Yorkshire Dales. Although the mountain mass of the Howgills was large enough to have its own ice cap during the last Ice Age, ice from the Lake District and Pennines may have hemmed the Howgills in ice, reducing the amount of erosion that could take place. The rounded summits therefore show very little glacial erosion. Cautley Crags are the only glacial features, where the cliffs rise up from behind the beginnings of a corrie. Several small streams flow off the hilltops and down the gills in a radial pattern from the central core, to join the River Lune in the north and west, and the Rawthey in the east and south.
Distinctive landscape character

The fells comprise a discrete group of high steep sided, smooth rounded hills, dominated by the summits of Arant How, The Calf, Fell Head and Bram Rigg Top, and sharply incised by a number of gills. The remarkable landform of the Howgill Fells makes them visually distinct from the surrounding high land of the Cumbria High Fells to the west, the main part of the Yorkshire Dales to the east and the Orton Fells to the north.

The high and exposed open moorland provides uninterrupted views. The fells are unenclosed, but drystone walls separate the open common land of the fells from the rough pastures on the lower slopes. There is evidence of severe erosion on some of the steeper slopes, whilst others are covered with loose scree. Small streams cascade over black rocks down the narrow rocky gills, occasionally forming dramatic waterfalls.

The Howgill Fells are isolated and inaccessible. The difficult landform has prevented settlement, and there is a notable absence of archaeological features on the fells. There is no settlement and no through roads. Access has been limited to the river valleys that provided routes around the edge of the group of hills. They have thus been little affected by any particular phase of historical or cultural activity, although they have been cleared of woodland and used for grazing for many centuries.

There are no roads crossing the fells and only occasional isolated farmsteads on the slower slopes, sheltered by groups of mature sycamore.

There is no woodland cover on the fells, although occasional isolated trees and small groups of trees occur within steep sided gills and cling to rocky outcrops. The hills are unenclosed and are grazed in common by sheep and wild ponies.

The majority of the area consists of acidic grassland with small stretches of heather. Blanket bog occurs on some of the higher, flatter hilltops, while bracken covers the freer draining side slopes. There is virtually no tree cover; only small ash, alder and hawthorn woodlands in some of the steep sided gills.

This is a dramatic, awe inspiring landscape with a strong sense of identity. The virtual absence of settlement and roads and the extensive tracts of empty exposed upland create a remote landscape with a strong sense of relative wildness. To the west the M6 motorway and railway are close by, but the landscape is able, for the most part, to retain a remote feel by virtue of its scale and elevation.

The cluster of summits appears over-scaled - like a mountain range - in some views from the surrounding landscapes.
A powerful identity - the Howgills have a dramatic, awe-inspiring scale and strong visual simplicity and unity, with a powerful identity.

Simple, distinctive and very consistent pattern of landform and landcover.

Great Dummocks and Cautley Crags - from Bluecaster side in the Upper Rawthey Valley.

Leath Gill in Bowderdale.

Gais Gill and the summit of Knot.

Eroded gully and debris fan within the Langdale, Bowderdale and Carlin Gill SSSI.

The Howgills have a dramatic, awe-inspiring scale and strong visual simplicity and unity, with a powerful identity.
Small streams cascade down dark rocky gills and over occasional dramatic tumbling waterfalls.

Sheep and fell ponies grazing on Udale Head.

Empty, exposed and remote - with an exceptionally strong sense of tranquillity and wilderness.
Key natural, cultural and perceptual features

NATURAL

High rounded summits, dissected by deeply incised narrow gills - a prominent and visually striking landform with a soaring scale and smoothly folded profile. 📷 10

Distinctive domed massif with a radial drainage pattern of small streams, which cascade down narrow dark rocky gills and over occasional dramatic tumbling waterfalls, such as Cautley Spout and Black Force. Most gills are unwooded and appear as wrinkles and creases on the otherwise smooth slopes. 📷 10

Occasional exposed dark rocky outcrops, such as the partial corrie at Cautley Crag and areas of rock scree. 📷 10

Simple, distinctive and very consistent pattern of landform and land cove - dominated by acid grassland, with poorly drained areas of moorland and blanket bog on the high ground and stands of bracken on lower slopes. 📷 10

Occasional steep-sided wooded gills, with small areas of ancient semi-natural woodland, particularly on the lower slopes of the Lune Gorge.

Nationally important geodiversity - Langdale, Bowderdale and Carlin Gill SSSI is of exceptional importance for its undisturbed fluvial geomorphology. Other SSSIs include Backside Beck and Spen Gill which has valuable exposures of Ordovician and Silurian rocks. 📷 10

Pockets of habitat diversity - small areas of heather and blanket bog on the hill tops and springs and flushes on the lower slopes are the most diverse habitats.

CULTURAL

Complete absence of settlement due to the high landform and difficult terrain of the fells

Unenclosed, open moorland with an unusual and historic pattern of land ownership and management – the fells are grazed in common by sheep and wild ponies, with the rights held by farming families based in the adjoining valleys. This grazing system forms a significant part of the local farming culture and economy. 📷 10

Low Borrowbridge in the Lune Gorge - earthworks at the site of an important Roman Fort along a historic transport route. Fairmile Road, a short section of Roman Road, crosses the lower slopes of Ling Haw and Blease Fell en route to Low Borrowbridge Fort.

PERCEPTUAL

Powerful identity – a highly distinctive landscape unit with a dramatic, awe inspiring scale and strong visual simplicity and unity. 📷 10

The Howgills have an ‘ancient’, timeless quality - the cluster of summits appears over-scaled - like a mountain range - in some views from the surrounding landscapes. 📷 10

Strong associations with Wainwright who evocatively describes the Howgills landscape as “sleek and smooth, looking from a distance like velvet curtains in sunlight, like silken drapes at sunset; they are steep sided but gently domed... Their soaring sweeping lines are not interrupted by walls or fences... a remarkable concentration of summits often likened to a huddle of squatting elephants”. Aptly described by Wordsworth as the ‘naked heights.’ 📷 10

Empty, exposed upland with an exceptionally strong sense of tranquillity and wilderness. 📷 10

Striking contrasts in the colour and texture on the unenclosed fell sides - the extent of mottled grass, combined with heavy grazing, contributes to the smooth, sleek character and light colour of the fells which is juxtaposed with areas of bracken and tussocky wet flushes. 📷 10

Outstanding panoramic, long distance and uninterrupted views.

Photos that illustrate specific key natural, cultural and perceptual features are numbered eg. 📷 10

Upper valley of Carlin Gill

High, rounded summits dissected by deeply incised narrow gills
**The Special Qualities of the Yorkshire Dales National Park** are described in the National Park’s Management Plan 2019-24. This map shows selected special qualities (for which spatial data is available) that are found within the Howgill Fells LCA.

This special qualities mapping is shown within the area that forms the backdrop to local views; it reflects the extent of visibility and the overall landscape setting for the Howgill Fells LCA.

**Special Qualities of the YDNP**
- YDNP Boundary
- Howgill Fells LCA boundary
- Extent of area that forms the backdrop to views from the Howgill Fells LCA

**Natural beauty**
- Dales with distinctive stepped profiles
  - Displaying outcrops of rocks from the Foredale series
- Fells that rise to over 700m
  - Eg the Millstone Grit capped ‘Three Peaks’
- The Howgills
  - Areas in the YDNP underlain by Silurian rocks
- Significant glacial/post-glacial features
  - Prominent drumlins and glacial drift landforms
- Spectacular waterfalls
  - Water features noted as ‘recognised attraction’ in YDNPA Visitor Strategy

**Wildlife**
- Flower-rich hay meadows and pastures
  - Lowland meadows; Upland hay meadows
- A range of rare limestone habitats
  - Limestone pavements; Lowland calcareous grassland; Upland calcareous grassland
- Extensive areas of moorland
  - Upland heathland; Blanket bog; Lowland raised bog
- Small areas of broadleaf woodland
  - Deciduous woodland; ancient woodland (darker tone)

*Priority Habitats [S41 NERC Act 2010]*
Cultural heritage*

- A traditional pastoral landscape
  [Traditional stone-built field barns]
- An exceptional range of archaeology
  [Strip lynchets & prehistoric field systems that are prominent]
- Powerful reminders of periods of dominance by
  large estates and religious houses
  [Ancient & historic parklands & other ornamental landscapes]
- The remains of former rural industries
  [Sites of former lead & coal mines & lime kilns]
- Historic settlements with distinctive traditional
  architecture
  [Conservation Areas]

* YDNPA Historic Environment Record