

KVE Kennet Valley East

Topography, Geology and Soils

This area covers the lower slopes and floor of the Kennet Valley between Thatcham and Englefield. It also includes the watershed, Mare Ridge, between the Kennet and the Bourne. The geology is mainly London Clays which are overlain by extensive gravels on the valley floor. Small areas of Bagshot Beds capped by plateau gravels are found on high ridges between Midgham and Woolhampton. Two types of soil are found on the valley floor: clayey alluvial gleys are present east of Aldermaston and humic-alluvial gleys to its west, and both have extensive peat deposits. Soil types on the valley sides are varied with clay stagnogleys between Thatcham and Aldermaston Mill, silty argyllic brown earths between Aldermaston Mill and Englefield, loamy argyllic gleys between Sheffield Bottom and Pingewood and sandy podzols and brown sands on the Mare Ridge.

Historic Landscape

The area was characterised by nucleated villages on the valley bottom, surrounded by open fields on the lower slopes of the valley and common meadow grazing by the riverside. The London to Bath coaching route, itself formed from an earlier route and now the A4, runs along the valley bottom and forms the major roadway through the area. Smaller areas of hamlets and scattered farms set within early enclosures and woodland were found near the upper slopes of the valley. Areas of open fields around Midgham, Woolhampton and Englefield had been enclosed into fields by the 18th century. Around Midgham and Woolhampton these fields were irregularly-shaped and enclosure seems to have taken place in a piecemeal fashion. The fields near Englefield were much more regularly-shaped and probably represent a planned phase of enclosure. About a third of the common meadow had also been enclosed into fields by this date. The majority of these were pasture fields but some water meadows were also created, most extensively south of Thatcham. The remaining areas of open field and common meadow were enclosed by Act of Parliament in the early 19th century resulting in the creation of large areas of regularly-shaped parliamentary fields around Midgham, Woolhampton and the Mare Ridge at Englefield.

Woodland was not a frequent feature of this area and was present only toward its northern edge. All woodlands within the area were identified as ancient woodland. The woods varied in extent with the largest around Englefield and smaller blocks around Midgham and Woolhampton.

Three large parks were sited on the northern side of the valley. Woolhampton Park and Midgham Park were located very close to each other on the lower slopes of the valley and both were large estates with landscaping, plantations and lodges. Englefield Park began as a medieval deer park and developed into a sizeable landscape park in the 18th and 19th centuries. Englefield had a significant impact on the landscape and will be discussed in slightly greater detail under its HECZ description (*EPVS*).

The historic settlement pattern is generally nucleated with settlement mainly found at the edge of the gravel terraces in the valley bottom. Woolhampton was the largest settlement and lies at the junction of routes across and along the Kennet Valley. Settlement outside of the villages was more specialised, and included several mills on

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the Kennet and small roadside settlements along the London to Bath road. Some of the roadside settlements focus around coaching inns and it is likely that these settlements developed, perhaps from small existing groups of houses, to serve the coach traffic developing along the road. Hamlets and groups of farms, such as Harts Hill are found on the higher slopes of the valley toward the north-western edge of the area. Large farms were present throughout the area and were mainly found in areas of early enclosure of open fields.

Modern Landscape

Huge changes have occurred in this area over the course of the 20th century, the two major factors being agricultural change and gravel extraction. Almost all fields have been altered either through re-organisation or boundary removal and, although traces of the historic fields survive, the fieldscapes of the area are modern in character. Only a very few examples of unaltered historic fields remain and they survive as islands within the current farming landscape. The arable extent has also increased with the extension of cultivation into previously non-arable areas. Most of the water meadows known in this area are now under arable and large areas of former parklands are now in active cultivation. Some areas of paddocks are found but are much less frequent than in adjacent areas.

Gravel extraction has led to the modification of large portions of the valley floor. Mineral extraction is ongoing at Midgham Marsh, Aldermaston Wharf and Woolhampton. Some areas of former quarry have been restored to arable land between Woolhampton and Brimpton and at Aldermaston Wharf. The fields established on these refilled quarries are not the same as those that had previously existed, and represent the creation of a new fieldscape rather than the restoration of the historic fieldscape. Disused quarries are more commonly left to flood and form artificial lakes and this is most widespread at Thatcham and around Theale and the M4. These lakes are used for a variety of purposes including fishing, water-sports and nature reserves. Traces of the pre-quarrying landscape remain around the lakes as many of the baulks between pits run along the boundaries and drainage channels of the historic meadows and fields.

There has been little alteration to ancient woodlands; however, tree-cover has increased greatly within this area through the creation of woodland plantations and the development of secondary woodland. The majority of secondary woodlands have grown up on the valley floor on areas that were enclosed meadows or parliamentary enclosures from common meadow. Some of these areas seem to have been too marshy for permanent grazing or cultivation and have been left to scrub over, eventually turning into woodland. Several large plantations have also been established on similar marshy locations and the majority are around Woolhampton. The base of the valley now has a much more wooded character and this is particularly true of the section between Brimpton Mill and Aldermaston Mill which is now almost entirely wooded. The new woods have given the valley floor a wooded character it did not historically possess.

Englefield Park has seen little significant change but both Woolhampton and Midgham Parks have been subject to considerable alteration, and areas of the grounds of both parks are now under arable cultivation. Woolhampton has seen greatest change with the house itself and sections of its grounds used by a school and some of its land lost to new housing.

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Housing growth has taken place around many of the historic settlements within the HLCA with most focussed around Midgham, Woolhampton and Aldermaston Wharf. The majority of new housing around existing settlements has been constructed on an ad-hoc basis, consisting of infill and growth around historic settlement nuclei, and formal housing estate developments are rare. Woolhampton has seen significant growth and is now about three times its historic size. The largest growth has been around Aldermaston Wharf. Housing has spread out from Aldermaston Wharf onto the A4 creating a two mile long belt of housing, part of which is known as Lower Padworth. A small amount of new housing has been constructed at other locations creating settlement nuclei such as Spire Ridge and Church View Farm in Midgham and Broom Hill in Woolhampton that did not previously exist. These are generally characterised by groups of large detached houses.