

## **LV Lambourn Valley**

### **Topography, Geology and Soils**

This area is the Lambourn valley and the surrounding downs from Bagnor to the valley heading northwest of Lambourn. The valley has a narrow floor with many dry valleys cut into the valley sides from its watersheds with the Kennet and Winterbourne. The geology of the area is almost entirely chalk, although small areas of Reading Beds occur on the upper valley slopes south of Weston and a narrow band of gravel exists in the valley floor. Flinty brown calcareous earths exist over the valley floor with clayey palaeo-argyllic brown earths on the valley sides south of East Garston and flinty rendzinas to the north and onto the downs.

### **Historic Landscape**

The medieval landscape of this area was based on nucleated settlements on the valley floor, with open fields on the valley sides and common grazing on riverside meadows and downs at the head of the valley and on its sides. The majority of the open field south of East Garston was enclosed into fields by the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Most were irregularly-shaped and slotted into the framework of the landscape established by roads and tracks and open field strips, suggesting that they were enclosed on a gradual, piecemeal basis. Significant areas of more regularly-shaped early enclosures existed around East Shefford, East Garston and Welford. These were probably created following an agreement between local land-holders and farmers to rationalise and enclose holdings in the common fields. The meadows had also largely been enclosed by this date; some were simply enclosed into pasture fields, but the majority became water meadows. These covered the valley floor between East Garston and Bagnor and formed the district's most significant concentration of water meadows outside the Kennet Valley. The majority of the remaining open fields and downs, including almost all of Lambourn parish, were enclosed into fields through Act of Parliament in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The only unenclosed downland that remained were small areas west of Lambourn and north of East Garston.

Woodland was historically very sparse in this area with little ancient or other historic broadleaf woodland. Woods were almost entirely absent from the upper part of the valley. Some blocks of ancient woodland did exist but they were generally small and most were in the south of the area near its edge. The only large ancient wood was on the southern edge of Welford Park, the single substantial park in the area.

Settlement was nucleated and concentrated in a few large villages and hamlets of medieval or earlier origin. These were sited on the valley floor and were spaced at fairly regular intervals. Farms were not common and were located either along the river in gaps between the hamlets and villages or, more commonly, on the upper slopes of the valley. Most were named after adjacent settlements or topographic features.

### **Modern Landscape**

Agricultural mechanisation from the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century led to a dramatic alteration of this landscape as existing fields were amalgamated into larger holdings, either through boundary removal or through reorganisation. Many historic features, such as hedgerows, were removed, creating expanses of relatively featureless arable fields. This trend also saw the enclosure of the majority of remaining downland for further large arable fields.

## *Historic Environment Character Area*

Downland is now found only in small areas on steep scarp slopes where farming is uneconomic or impractical. Some historic fields do survive as functioning parts of the farming landscape, mostly around Boxford and Bagnor, but these are usually isolated instances of a couple of fields. Active management of water meadows ceased in the earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century and most became pasture or fields. Some have become wooded areas, either through active plantation or gradual scrubbing over and re-colonisation.

Due to the growth of Lambourn as a nationally important centre of the racehorse industry, large parts of the landscape are now covered by land-uses related to horse breeding and training. This is most evident around Lambourn itself where significant areas of former fields and downs are now extensive stretches of paddocks and gallops. Several studs have been established, including some that have developed at historic farms in the downs above Lambourn.

A large American military base exists at Welford. The base started as an RAF airfield in WWII and has now become one of the USAF's most significant European bomb stores. Most previous land-use features, including field boundaries and a large area of ancient woodland, were removed by construction of the base.

There has been a slight increase in tree cover across the whole area. Woodland regeneration has contributed to this but the rise is largely due to the creation of tree plantations. Some plantations are 19<sup>th</sup> century in date, but most were created in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and many were funded by the Woodland Grant Scheme. Most were created as shelter features and are small and rectilinear. They are often sited in the middle of fields and usually do not fit with the established grain of landscape. This is most visible in Lambourn parish, previously an almost totally unwooded area that now contains many oddly-shaped plantations that jar with the landscape. Despite overall growth, areas of ancient and other old woodland have been lost. Many were removed for cultivation or construction, as at RAF Welford, and some were replanted with non-native species. Replanted ancient woods exist between Boxford and Bagnor. These woods do not have the same biodiversity as ancient woodlands and clearance is likely to have damaged or removed historic features, such as woodbanks.

Settlement growth has been modest and confined largely to infill or growth around existing settlements and has centred on East Garston, West Shefford and Boxford. Most housing has been constructed since the later 20<sup>th</sup> century but a small amount of growth took place at East Garston in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Very few new settlement nuclei have been created.

The changes have had a significant impact on character, as large and regular arable expanses have been created over the whole of the area where previously there would have been either open downland or a more intimate network of smaller fields. Some of the historic feel is retained however due to minor settlement growth and the continued existence and use of the sinuous network of roads and tracks through the area.