

SBC Snelsmore and Bucklebury Commons

Topography, Geology and Soils

This is an area of high ground and dry valleys between the High Downs and the Pang and Kennet Valleys. Much of the area is composed of the watershed between the Pang and the Kennet-Lambourn-Winterbourne drainage network. Two dry valleys run from the Downs to the Lambourn, the first from Chieveley to Donnington and the other from Oare to Shaw. London Clays are found across most of the area and on the highest ground are overlain by Bagshot Beds capped by plateau gravels. Chalk outcrops in the valley bases and is overlain by Reading Beds. On high ground in the north and west Reading Beds are overlain by London Clays capped by plateau gravels. A mix of soils exist in the area: clay stagnogley soils extend over the most of the area; stony, sandy podzols and brown sands exist on the plateaux; and the dry valley bases have flinty argyillic brown earths.

Historic Landscape

This area seems to have had a medieval landscape characterised by small fields and dispersed small settlements and farms, inter-related with large commons and woods with a dense network of roads and tracks. The interplay of land-use, roads and the axes of the ridges and valleys created a very irregular grain to the landscape.

Much of the area was enclosed into small irregularly-shaped fields suggesting that they were created by numerous individual farmers, perhaps over a long period of time. Many assarts existed on the fringes of larger commons and some woods and it is possible that some fields identified as early enclosures were assarts. Three blocks of regularly-shaped fields existed in the area: between Snelsmore Common and Bussock; around Bradfield South End; and between Oare and Eling. The regularity of the fields suggests that they were created in a planned fashion and may result from agreement between local landholders, farmers and commoners to rationalise their holdings and rights in the common grazing into fields. Traces of open fields existed south of Curridge and these too, had been enclosed into fields by the 18th century. This area may have been part of the open field of Shaw and Thatcham and is probably a continuation of the medieval landscape of the Kennet Valley that has been cut-off from similar landscapes by the development of Newbury and Thatcham.

Extensive commons covered much of the area; an almost continuous chain ran along the Pang watershed from Bradfield South End to Eling. Some were enclosed privately before the late 18th century but many were enclosed through Act of Parliament. Expanses of common land at Bucklebury and Snelsmore remained unenclosed into the 20th century.

The landscape was densely wooded; most woods were large and have been identified as ancient woodlands. The largest ancient woods were adjacent to or interleaved with commons (eg Carbins Wood, Fence Wood). Areas of other old woods existed across the area. These were generally small in size and located mostly on the edges of ancient woods. A very large area of this type of woodland was present on the east side of Snelsmore Common. Most woods in the area were coppiced.

Parks were not common in the area, most being minor parklands that had been established in the 19th century. A large section of Dunston Park extended into this area;

Historic Environment Character Area

the rest was within *KVE*, and it is probable that this was to achieve a landscape of contrast within the park.

The area was more densely settled than the neighbouring valleys, and small settlements were distributed thickly across the landscape. The historic settlement pattern was dispersed and dominated by common-edge settlements and farms. Largest concentrations of settlements were at Cold Ash, Hermitage, and on the north and east fringes of Bucklebury Common. The largest settlement around Bucklebury Common was Chapel Row but most had no formal name. These settlements have their roots in squatter occupation by those wishing to exploit the resources of the common. Their development is poorly understood: they existed by the 18th century but may date back further. Numerous farms were scattered across the area, the majority named after topographic features and places; however some had possessive names. Some small-scale settlement growth occurred in the 18th and 19th centuries and this was mainly confined to infill around existing settlement or the construction of small numbers of large houses for the affluent classes.

Modern Landscape

This is one of the most highly modified areas in the District. Most historic enclosures have been rationalised into fields suited to modern mechanised agriculture through boundary removal and reorganisation. This has been intensified with the construction of the M4 and A34 through parts of the area. Large areas of paddocks have also been created from historic fields around settlements. Few historic enclosures are unaltered, large areas of historic fields do not survive and those fields that do remain exist as small, isolated groups amidst a modern farming landscape. These changes have created a much more regular landscape and have significantly broken up the historic character of the area. Parliamentary enclosures are almost entirely absent from the modern landscape and most have been used for housing and tree plantations. Many former parkland areas have been enclosed into arable fields and paddocks.

Significant changes have occurred in the tree-cover with many blocks of ancient woodland cleared of native tree cover and replanted with other species. This has impacted on the character of the area as many replanted woods are very large in size. Replanted woods often have dense single species tree-cover and lack the biodiversity of ancient woodlands. Several areas of ancient and other old woods have been cleared over the course of the 20th century. Some clearance has been for farming or quarrying but most has been used for housing. A huge number of plantations, many very large, have been established within the area. Most were created on former common heathland, including areas enclosed to fields under Parliamentary enclosure. Some of the largest plantations were created in the later 19th century east of Hermitage. Plantations have greatly increased the wooded cover of the area and introduced very tightly packed woodland into areas that were very open. This has changed the character of the area and made large parts of it feel much more visually enclosed than previously.

A lack of grazing on remaining commons and some plantations led to many becoming substantially wooded over by the middle of the 20th century. This is being tackled by management and conservation work at Snelsmore Common. Bucklebury Common and Snelsmore East Common remain very wooded.

Historic Environment Character Area

Huge housing growth has occurred since the later 20th century and is ongoing as the area lies within easy reach of Newbury, Thatcham, the M4, A34 and A4. New housing has focussed around historic settlement nuclei and has spread along roads that join them. It is a mixture of small estates and developments of a few large houses. Much of the housing is affluent in nature and swimming pools and tennis courts are common features. Development has been so intense that it can be hard to tell where one settlement finishes and the next starts. This is true on the road between Thatcham and Hampstead Norreys where a band of settlement runs for about four miles from Cold Ash, taking in Longlane, Curridge and Hermitage, to Little Hungerford. A settlement consisting of several small estates has grown up at Upper Bucklebury; previously there was only a small common-edge settlement (Byles's Green) anywhere in this vicinity. The combination of large areas of housing and paddocks has given much of the central portion of the area a suburban feel.