

SWH Stockcross – Wickham Heath

Topography, Geology and Soils

This is the south-eastern tip of the Lambourn – Kennet watershed. This area has a different geology to neighbouring HECAs and is comprised of Reading Beds overlain on the ridge top by London Clay and capped by plateau gravels. Soils are mostly to stony podzols and brown sands with a small area of loamy clay stagnogleys at the north-western tip of the area.

Historic Landscape

There is a mix here of early enclosures, extensive commons, small areas of woodland, dispersed settlement and some small to medium sized parks. This was a largely open landscape into the 18th century, centred on an extensive heathland common, Wickham Heath, which occupied most of the ridge. Some early enclosure fields were present around the fringes of the common; most were regularly-shaped but some irregular enclosures existed at Wickham, Stockcross and Hoe Benham. A large area of regularly-shaped early enclosures was present between Hoe Benham and Stockcross. The regularity of these fields suggests that this was a part of the common that was enclosed by agreement between commoners and local farmers. The majority of this common was enclosed into fields in the early 19th century by a series of Acts of Parliament with only a small portion around Sole Common remaining unenclosed into the 20th century.

Some areas of woodland existed around the fringes of the common. These areas were a mix of ancient and other old woods that were mostly small in extent and coppiced.

The historic settlement pattern was dispersed and settlements were located on the edge of the common heath. Stockcross and Wickham seem to be common-edge settlements but the nature of Hoe Benham is less clear. The settlement at Wickham Heath does not appear to have existed in the 18th century. It was established in the 19th century, perhaps to resettle commoners turned out when the Act to enclose the common was implemented. Stockcross also seems to have grown substantially in the early 19th century and this may also have been due to resettlement of commoners, although it is also an estate village.

Some parks are present in the area but are mostly small in extent, such as Foley Lodge and Deanwood. A larger landscape park existed at Wormstall, and this seems to have been created or enlarged in the later 18th century. This park may have been laid out over an extant or deserted medieval settlement as an early church lies within the park extent at Wickham.

Modern Landscape

The area has been transformed over the course of the 20th century by agricultural changes and afforestation. The process of rationalising historic enclosures into fields more suited to modern agriculture has taken place widely across this area and most fields in the area have been altered to some extent. An area of largely unmodified historic enclosures remains between Hoe Benham and Ownham. Sole Common has remained unenclosed.

Historic Environment Character Area

The most substantial change in this area is the huge growth in tree-cover. The majority of Parliamentary enclosures from the heath have been turned into conifer plantations. This process had begun in the 1880s, but most plantations were put in during the mid-20th century. It is likely that the heathland was found to be unsuited to agriculture soon after its enclosure and trees were planted instead as the most productive use of the land. This has altered the feel of landscape from a visually very open one, with views into Kennet and Lambourn valleys and to the high downs, to a very enclosed area with only short horizons due to the density and extent of tree-plantations. Some blocks of secondary woodland have also grown up on previously farmed land around the fringes of the area. Ancient woodlands in the area have had mixed fortunes; one wood was cleared for agriculture and several others have been cleared of native tree cover and replanted with other species.

Settlement growth has occurred at all historic settlement nuclei, except Hoe Benham, and is characterised by expansion around existing nuclei and infill within the historic core. It has been most significant at Stockcross where new housing and recreation areas have nearly doubled the size of the settlement. The growth of Stockcross has been spurred by it being far enough away from Newbury to feel rural but well-located for transport at the A4 and A34 junction.

The parks at Foley Lodge and Deanwood have largely been adapted for recreational use and are now home to the Vineyard hotel at Stockcross and a small golf course. The park at Wormstall has remained largely unaltered.