

WDP Wooded Downs Plateau

Topography, Geology and Soils

This area is the highest section of the Kennet – Lambourn watershed. It is a wide plateau that drops steeply away on the north side to the Lambourn valley and more gently to the Kennet on the south. There are no year round water-courses but the edge of the plateau is incised by the heads of dry valleys running into either river system. A single major dry valley cuts into the plateau itself and runs from Lambourn Woodlands, via Hungerford Newtown, to the Kennet at Kintbury. The geology is mainly chalk with occasional very localised outcrops of Reading Beds. The floor of the major dry valley has deposits of valley gravels. Soils are fairly uniform across the area and are clayey and flinty palaeo-argyllic brown earths.

Historic Landscape

This is a largely early enclosed landscape with substantial areas of woodland and a dispersed settlement pattern. The main route through the area was Ermin Street, the Roman road from Silchester to Cirencester, which ran along the crest of the watershed. Numerous small, sinuous roads and tracks branched off Ermin Street linking the plateau and the valley floors. Very little of the area remained unenclosed or not covered by mature woodland by the start of the 18th century. The fieldscapes were mostly composed of small-scale, irregularly-shaped enclosures interleaved with woodland. Some fields were identified as assarts and it is likely that other early enclosures may also be assarts; this could be clarified by further research. In the south-east of the area, fields are larger and more sinuous, suggesting that they may have been enclosed from open downland. In most cases there is no definite evidence of what kind of land the fields were created from, and the typical downs combination of open fields and common downland grazing seems absent from this area. Parliamentary enclosures were only present at King's Heath. This was an area of common heath that, unlike the rest of the area, had remained unenclosed into the 19th century.

Woodland was widely spread across the area. Most woodland is ancient; smaller areas of other old woods were also present. The ancient woodland was present in large blocks, most of which show signs of assartment.

The historic settlement pattern was dispersed and had no nucleated villages. It is typified by small discontinuous settlements, such as Lambourn Woodlands and Shefford Woodlands, which are strung out along the Roman road and lack a clear centre. Farms were fairly densely scattered across the area and most are named after individuals, such as Dixon's Farm and Gooding's Farm. There is evidence for slight settlement growth over the 18th and 19th centuries with new housing built along the Roman road.

Parklands were not commonly found in this area. Two smallish parks were established almost next-door to each other in the southern half of the area at Inholmes and Poughley.

The combination of farm names, assarted woodlands and the irregular early enclosed landscape suggests that this area had long been enclosed into fields, probably by individual farmers carving out their own farmland from the downs and woodlands. Much of this landscape is likely to date back at last to the medieval period.

Historic Environment Character Area

Modern Landscape

The western portion of the area has been heavily modified by the construction of Membury Airfield during WWII. This took an angular chunk out of the landscape, truncating surrounding fields, and included the insertion of shielding plantations of fast growing conifers around parts of the base's perimeter. Although now disused, the airfield still has a presence in the landscape. Most of the airfield area is farmed and the remains of runways and service routes form the boundaries of the fields. Many of the airfield buildings have been re-used as business and industrial premises leading to a small industrial estate developing in an otherwise very rural area. Membury motorway services have also been constructed within the former airfield footprint.

Across the rest of the area fieldscapes have seen large-scale rationalisation through a combination of field reorganisation and boundary removal. This has led to a much less irregular-looking landscape. Boundary removal was commonest in the assarts around East Garston Woodlands. The construction of the M4 motorway also contributed to this reorganisation through disruption and truncation of historic field systems. The conversion of historic enclosures into paddocks is common. They are most widespread around the Kingwood Stud but are also found in blocks across the rest of the area. Some blocks of historic fields survive around Lambourn Woodlands and East Garston Woodlands and south of King's Heath.

A few blocks of ancient woodland were cleared for agricultural use, mostly in the later 20th century. Some areas have also been cleared of their native woodland cover and been replanted with new trees; this is commonest to the south of Inholmes Park.

Settlement growth has been negligible and mostly consists of new houses or groups of houses constructed between historic settlement nuclei along the Roman road.

Inholmes and Poughley parks remain but have contracted slightly with some of their grounds having been turned over to agriculture.