

KVFE Kennet Valley Floor East

Historic Character

This zone comprises the eastern part of the Kennet floodplain. Gravel quarrying and the construction of the M4 have split it into two discontinuous sections: the first and largest between Thatcham and Sulhamstead, and the second between Theale and Reading.

The floodplain was historically an area of meadow land, including some marsh, which was used as common grazing and shared between the settlements along the edge of the valley floor. Large areas of the floodplain had been enclosed into pasture, including some water meadows between Thatcham and Woolhampton, by the 18th century. The remaining meadow was enclosed into fields by a series of Acts of Parliament in the mid-19th century. Settlement was largely absent from the floodplain and the only settlements were mills and a few farms, although it seems there was a manor at Chamberhouse.

The floodplain remains a largely rural area but there have been considerable changes to it over the latter half of the 20th century. There has been large-scale alteration of the fieldscape in parts of the floodplain, with many pasture fields rationalised into larger agricultural fields. Areas of largely unaltered pasture fields remain between Aldermaston and Padworth Mill, at Sulhamstead and around Burghfield Mill and Burghfield Bridge. Large-scale commercial gravel extraction has taken place and is ongoing at several locations around Woolhampton and Aldermaston Wharf. Woodland was not a feature of this zone historically, but several parts of the floodplain are now starting to develop a wooded character and the area between Brimpton Mill and Aldermaston Mill is now almost entirely wooded. The new woods are a mixture of plantations and woodland regeneration on marshy parts of the floodplain. Settlement has remained sparse on the floodplain. Change due to the above factors is most evident in the area south of Woolhampton. Despite significant alteration in land-use the character of the zone has not yet been heavily modified.

Historic Environment

Activity for all periods has been documented on the floodplain and this stretch of the Kennet has attracted much archaeological work. This has included evaluation and excavation of areas prior to quarrying, and research into past environmental conditions. It was also the focus of the Lower Kennet Valley Survey, which appraised the known archaeological resource and conducted field-walking along sections of the valley floor. Most evidence for this zone comes from finds, extant historic buildings and structures, and documentary references. Earthworks and cropmarks, though common on adjacent valley sides, are rare on the floodplain and the lack of cropmarks may be due to alluvium masking the archaeological features

Mesolithic finds have been recovered from several locations and a probable occupation site was located by fieldwalking at Midgham Marsh. The Kennet has the highest known concentration of Mesolithic activity in the district, and these sites are an important component of this pattern. The potential for discovery of further Mesolithic sites on the floodplain is high. A general spread of prehistoric activity has been found across the zone, mostly evidenced by findspots and artefact scatters only, therefore the nature of exploitation of the area during this period is unclear. Extensive later prehistoric and Romano-British settlement has been found on the floodplains of other river systems, such as the Thames, and it is likely that such sites may be present in this zone, but are yet to be discovered.

Historic Environment Character Zone

Considerable Romano-British activity is known and with a concentration between Aldermaston Mill and Chamberhouse Farm. The course of the road from Silchester to Cirencester, Ermin Street, is known to have run through this part of the floodplain. The road is thought to have crossed the Kennet near Quaking Bridge, but the nature of the crossing has yet to be established. Settlement and field systems are known from adjacent valley sides and evidence of land divisions has been found on the floodplain near Newbury Racecourse. It is unclear what the nature of activity on the floodplain was during this period, but it is probable that it was settled as well as farmed, and that archaeological features relating to this await discovery.

Evidence for later periods is relatively scarce and confined to medieval and later mill sites, the canal and related features, and Second World War pillboxes. There has been little work on the mills along the Kennet and their development is poorly understood. It is thought that they are of medieval origin and this could be clarified through further work. The canal has been subject to a huge programme of restoration and the cut and locks incorporate new material, whereas its bridges have seen less alteration. The Kennet was part of a major Second World War stop line and this section of the floodplain contains several pillboxes. These structures were an important component of this system but are now falling into disrepair.

Evidence for former river channels is likely to exist within the floodplain. Remains of structures related to river exploitation, such as wharves, fish-weirs and mills, may survive within former river channels or the present channel and its banks. Such deposits could range in date from Prehistoric to Post-Medieval and could be well-preserved through waterlogging. Remains of these features are likely to be significant as exploitation of riverine resources is poorly understood.

Historic Environment Potential

The potential for significant buried archaeological deposits is high across the zone. These deposits are most likely to be of Mesolithic, later prehistoric and Roman settlement and land-use. Former river channels and associated features are likely to be located on the floodplain. Elements of features such as wharves and fish-weirs are likely to be preserved within the present river channel. There is a significant stock of standing mill buildings and pillboxes that remain poorly understood and recorded.

Historic Environment Action Plan

Conservation Issues

- Intensive modern agriculture threatens the resource on buried archaeological sites.
- Continued intensive gravel extraction from valley floor.
- More detail is needed on the historic building stock to ensure appropriate policies are put in place to conserve this resource.
- Development pressure impinging into this traditionally unsettled zone.
- Management of Kennet and Avon canal and possible impacts on surviving early fabric of locks, bridges, etc.
- Management of WWII features.

Research Priorities

- Can the palaeo-environmental potential of the area be characterised and exploited?
- Where are we likely to find further Mesolithic sites? Is it possible to map the landscape to produce a predictive model for the Mesolithic?

Historic Environment Character Zone

- Does the general spread of prehistoric material across the zone represent settlement activity? Where are prehistoric settlements most likely to occur?
- Where are the Romano-British settlements? What was their character and function? Where was the crossing of the River Kennet? Was this via a bridge or ford?
- What does the relative paucity of medieval evidence in the area tell us about land use and socio-economic activity in the zone at this time?
- What was the nature of the manor at Chamberhouse and how did it develop?
- What are the origins of the farmsteads in the zone?
- Does archaeological evidence for the historic management of the river survive, especially in relation to mills and water management?
- Do the historic buildings in the zone contain any information about post-medieval and modern changes to land use and agricultural systems?
- Does archaeological evidence for the early development of the Kennet navigation survive in locks and other canal infrastructure?
- Can the surviving WWII defensive features in the Kennet Valley help us understand the military and political history of that period?