

## *Historic Environment Character Zone*

### **M4L M4 Lakes**

#### **Historic Character**

This zone contains a mix of extensive lakes created out of disused gravel pits, active gravel quarries and the M4. Many of the flooded quarry pits are now used for recreational purposes, such as angling and sailing at Pingewood Lakes.

The pre-quarrying landscape was characterised by meadows, irregularly shaped fields and small hamlets. The settlements and roads are all that remain of this landscape. The settlements are either agglomerations of buildings around a road junction and small commons, as at Sheffield Bottom and Pingewood, or clusters around mills, for example Sheffield Mill. The origin of the settlements is unclear, but they were all in existence by the 18<sup>th</sup> century and most probably date back further. Some recent settlement and small-scale industry has grown up on the islands of land left between the quarries, such as at Burghfield Bridge and Pingewood.

#### **Historic Environment**

Activity from all periods has been documented, but is most evident from the Clayhill Brook eastwards. Considerable archaeological work has been carried out; the zone was covered by the Lower Kennet Valley Survey and some quarries were subject to excavation prior to gravel extraction. The majority of gravel extraction and construction within this zone however, took place with little or no archaeological monitoring.

Some Palaeolithic material has been recovered from quarries in the east of the zone. Mesolithic finds have been made near the Kennet, but are not as common as in other parts of the floodplain. Evidence of Neolithic activity, including funerary sites and probable settlement, was located in the eastern part of the zone at Amner's Farm, Field Farm and Moore's Farm. Neolithic material was scarce over the western part of the zone, but included a probable cursus at Sheffield Bottom. Dense remains of Bronze Age and Iron Age settlement were excavated at Amner's Farm, Field Farm and Moore's Farm, but as with the Neolithic, few features were recorded in the western part of the zone.

Evidence of Romano-British settlement is less widespread, but was found during excavations at Field Farm, Moore's Farm and Searle's Farm.

Early medieval activity was generally very scarce, although an inhumation cemetery of this period was discovered during excavations at Field Farm. Despite little evidence for later medieval periods being located across the zone as a whole, work at Moore's Farm found several features of medieval date. The nature of activity indicated by these features was unclear. It is possible that the settlements in the zone date back to the medieval period and that buried archaeological deposits relating to this might survive within the settlement area.

Remains of structures related to river exploitation, such as wharves and fish-weirs, possibly survive within 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 would add significantly to our knowledge, as exploitation of riverine resources is poorly understood.

Standing structures are an important component of the historic environment resource of this zone. The Kennet and Avon canal (originally the Kennet Navigation) crosses through the north of the zone, forming the boundary in places. Two of its locks have been designated as listed

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buildings and Sheffield Lock is also a scheduled monument. Other listed buildings within the zone include several farm buildings and a mill. None of the buildings within Pingewood itself has been listed. The area adjacent to the canal around Sheffield Mill and Sheffield Lock has been designated as a Conservation Area.

The Kennet was part of a major Second World War stop-line, and five pillboxes, including one listed example, remain amidst the quarried landscape. Three pillboxes from the stop-line along the Reading to Basingstoke railway are recorded in the east of the zone but at least one of them seems to have been removed by recent quarrying. These pillboxes were an important component of these systems but are now falling into disrepair. There was also a military airfield at Theale.

The *M4L* zone is also dominated by other transport structures: two 19<sup>th</sup> century railway lines running out of Reading form part of its borders and the late 20<sup>th</sup> century M4 motorway and its service area bisects the zone.

### **Historic Environment Potential**

Gravel extraction offered the opportunity to investigate the archaeological remains in this zone, but has now removed the majority of the buried archaeological resource. The archaeological potential of the remaining unquarried areas, including pit baulks, is likely to be high. Such areas are most likely to contain Mesolithic, later Prehistoric and Romano-British features. Little is known of the origin and development of the settlements within the zone, and it is possible that archaeological deposits relating to their early history are present within the settlement areas. Elements of features such as wharves and fish-weirs are likely to be preserved within the present river channel. The zone has a small historic building stock but this is not well recorded. Further historic buildings and structural elements are likely to be recognised by further scrutiny of this resource. The pillboxes remain poorly recorded and in a deteriorating condition.

### **Historic Environment Action Plan**

#### Conservation Issues

- Major development pressure on the area lying between the M4 and Reading.
- 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.
- Conservation Area appraisal and management plan required.
- 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?
- Do the areas left by previous gravel extraction contain undisturbed archaeological features/deposits?
- Where are the Romano-British settlements? What was their character and function?
- Does the early medieval cemetery at Field farm represent wider settlement activity for this period?
- What does the paucity of medieval evidence in the area tell us about land use and socio-economic activity in the zone at this time?

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- 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 valleys help us understand the military and political history of that period?