

KVNW

Kennet Valley North-West

Historic Character

This is a rural zone comprising recent and historic fields, areas of ancient and other old woodlands, parklands and small settlements. Historically, the zone was a mix of open field farming on the lower slope and early enclosure fields and ancient woods on the upper valley side. Most of the open field was enclosed into regularly-shaped fields by the 18th century with areas north of Hungerford and around Halfway enclosed by Act of Parliament in the early 19th century. The settlement pattern was also mixed with nucleated settlements sited just off the floodplain and at fairly regular intervals along the valley and hamlets and large farms on the upper valley sides. Several extensive parklands, such as Elcot and Benham Valence, were established on the lower valley side in the 18th and 19th century. The interplay of fields, roads, woods and topography created an open landscape with a sinuous grain snaking up from the valley floor to the watershed.

This zone has experienced considerable change since the latter half of the 20th century. Many historic fields have been reorganised to create fields better suited to modern, mechanised farming, but some relatively unaltered areas of fields exist between Hungerford Newtown and Avington. Significant change in tree cover has also occurred with much ancient woodland between Hungerford Newtown, Avington and Winding Wood cleared to create fields. Several tree plantations have been established in the zone and some run counter to the grain of the landscape. Unlike other parts of the district, the extent of parkland here has remained fairly stable despite the fact that some have been taken over by hotels and offices. Little settlement growth has occurred in the zone. Overall the zone's historic character is largely intact despite the changes.

Historic Environment

Although HER records are common they are unevenly distributed across the zone and are dominated by cropmarks, features known from documentary evidence and buildings. Most HER monuments are near the junction with the valley floor, particularly between Avington and Speen, or on the upper valley side north of Hungerford Newtown and Winding Wood. The zone was covered by the National Mapping Programme, but little other archaeological work has been carried out.

Prehistoric activity has been documented at several locations. Early activity is attested by finds of Palaeolithic flintwork from five locations; however, these seem to be from re-deposited material and not in-situ. Fifteen probable Mesolithic occupation sites have been located by fieldwalking and form a continuation of the concentration of Mesolithic material between Avington and Hamstead Marshall on the valley floor. It is unclear whether this reflects the extent of fieldwork or an actual pattern of Mesolithic land-use. Cropmark ring ditches have been mapped at several locations and most are around the dry valley between Hungerford Newton and Kintbury. These are thought to be funerary monuments of later Neolithic/early Bronze Age date, but none have been excavated.

Definite later prehistoric material is scarce and consists of Iron Age pottery found at Eddington. Areas of cropmark field systems thought to be later prehistoric/Romano-British in date have been mapped on the upper valley side.

Some Romano-British evidence has been found in the zone and consists of a probable settlement and finds from the eastern edge of the zone and the course of a Roman road. Features of Romano-British date were excavated south-west of Speen prior to construction of

Historic Environment Character Zone

the A34 Newbury Bypass. Roman glassware and a coin hoard were found in the nearby Speen Moor area in the early 20th century. The course of the road from Bath to Ermin Street has been traced between Great Hidden Farm and Wickham and sections survive as earthworks in Three Gate Copse and Stibb's Wood.

Early medieval settlement was recorded in the zone and Leverton and 'Kintbury Amesbury' were mentioned in late 10th century charters and Domesday. Kintbury Amesbury was one of the seven manors of Kintbury; its site is lost but it was described as lying north of the Kennet and may have been in the vicinity of Barton Court or Avington. The origins, extent and precise locations of the early medieval settlements are unclear and deposits of this date have not yet been found. However early medieval metalwork and pottery have been found at Wickham and Radley Farm.

Late medieval records are of buildings or features known from documentary evidence and are mostly on the lower valley side. Late medieval settlement is known at Avington and most of its church is 12th and 13th century in date. A 16th century manor house also existed at Avington until the 1790s when it was burnt down and rebuilt; it is unclear if any of the earlier structure was reused. An early 16th century farmhouse remains at Great Hidden Farm. Barton Court was a monastic grange, but no features from this institution are apparent in extant buildings at the site. A deer park was referred to at Benham in 1349; its location is unclear, but it is assumed to have formed the core of the 18th landscape park of Benham Valence. Two deserted medieval villages have been identified, Leverton and Calcot. Leverton was redeveloped in the 18th century, but remains of medieval settlement may exist near the present settlement. No above-ground remains of Calcot exist: its site is thought to be near the junction of Upper Eddington Lane and Gypsy Lane.

Post-medieval records are scattered across the zone, most being of structures and parklands, and the majority lie near the junction with the floodplain. Only two of the four extensive parklands, Chilton and Benham Valence, are recorded on the HER, Denford and Elcot not being mapped. Benham Valence has been recognised as significant parkland and is included on the English Heritage register of historic parks and gardens. A large part of the site has also been designated as a Conservation Area. There are fifty-four listed buildings in the zone and they are a good reflection of the nature of the zone's historic building stock. They include 17th to 18th century farmhouses and farm buildings; country houses and elements of their ornamental landscapes; 17th to 19th century domestic buildings; and milestones.

Historic Environment Potential

Several locations have clear potential for below-ground deposits of prehistoric, Roman or medieval date. Later Neolithic to Romano-British deposits are likely across the upper valley side, whereas medieval and later deposits are less likely in this part of the zone. The majority of the zone has been ploughed since the medieval period and this may have caused truncation of deposits in places. Any below-ground deposits of medieval settlement will be crucial in understanding settlement development in this zone. It is possible that unrecorded features may exist in areas of ancient woodland. Although the historic building stock has been subject to some study, further significant structures may be identified.

Historic Environment Action Plan

Conservation Issues

- Intensive modern agriculture threatens the resource on buried archaeological sites.
- Ancient woodland has not been well managed in recent years and this poses a threat to its survival.
- There is a need to ensure that any new tree planting avoids the visually and archaeologically erosive impacts of recent plantations. Where possible opportunities to soften the impact of recent plantations should be encouraged.
- Designed parklands are a feature of this zone, but are poorly recorded and, with the exception of Benham Valence, not recognised through designation. These landscapes are also threatened by modern development pressure.
- 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 is required for Benham Valence Park.

Research Priorities

- What is the nature of the Mesolithic material found in the zone and do these represent further settlement/hunting camp sites?
- Does the paucity of evidence for prehistoric and Roman activity in the zone represent a true picture of the resource? The topographic conditions, gentle south facing slope would appear to represent a favourable location so why is more prehistoric and Roman material not present?
- Do the locations of the Bronze Age burial mounds tell us anything about the use of the landscape in this period?
- Does evidence for the Roman Road survive?
- Can the location of 'Kintbury Amesbury' be identified?
- What is the nature of the archaeological deposits at Leverton? Does this represent an early medieval settlement site?
- Does evidence of the monastic grange survive at Barton Court?
- What are the origins of the farmsteads in the zone?
- Do the historic buildings in the zone contain any information about post-medieval and modern changes to land use and agricultural systems?
- What are the origins and main features of the designed landscapes in this zone?