

MA Military Aldermaston

Historic Character

This is predominantly a military and commercial zone immediately to the south of Aldermaston village, most of which is occupied by AWE (Atomic Weapons Establishment) Aldermaston. AWE Aldermaston was established in 1950 following the appropriation of the estate's park as a temporary airfield during the Second World War. Aldermaston Court, which is included on the English Heritage Register of Parks and gardens of historic interest, contains the medieval parish church of Aldermaston and has its roots in a deer park established in the 12th century, that was gradually developed into a substantial landscape park during the 17th and 18th centuries. It is thought that the village of Aldermaston was moved from a site near the church and re-established at its present location to enable the expansion of the landscape park in the 18th century. The mansion of Aldermaston Court itself was constructed in the 1630s but was substantially altered following a fire in the mid 19th century. After the war, the building was returned into the ownership of Associated Electrical Industries as a private research facility, and a nuclear reactor was built nearby. To the south, the construction of the weapons establishment entailed considerable earth-moving and led to the removal of many landscape park features over most of the site and their replacement with industrial facilities and a grid of offices. In the later 20th century, the mansion and outbuildings were converted to a hotel and conference centre, and a large office built on the site of the reactor. Only the northern tip of the park around Aldermaston Court and the church remains largely intact, with areas of wooded parkland, although several ponds have survived throughout the zone. Commercial and office developments have been constructed along the road to the west of AWE including a small light-industrial estate.

Historic Environment

Due to the nature of the land-use that occupies much of this zone, little archaeological work has been conducted in the past either within the parkland or military Aldermaston and archaeological information is inevitably scarce. However, a characterisation exercise has recently been carried out for all the AWE sites (including Burghfield in *MB* and Blacknest in *AUNS*) and this has identified significant heritage features and outlined management issues.

It can be inferred that the zone has the potential to contain archaeological evidence of most periods as it lies in the midst of areas of general prehistoric activity, is crossed by Roman Ermin Street and has documentary evidence for medieval settlement. A surprising survival within AWE is one of the best preserved stretches of Grim's Bank, a linear earthwork that appears to relate to pre-Roman Silchester.

Historic Environment Potential

Archaeological potential across much of the AWE is however, likely to have been reduced by the earth-moving and construction. The less-developed northern tip of Aldermaston Park is likely to have a fairly high archaeological potential, particularly for evidence relating to Ermin Street and to the Saxon and medieval settlement thought to lie near the church.

AWE Aldermaston itself contains a range of structures and features related to its use as a WWII airfield and subsequently as the main research and manufacturing facility of Britain's nuclear arsenal. It is only in recent years that the potential value of the archaeological recording of sites of this nature has become understood and supported.

Historic Environment Action Plan

Conservation Issues

- Major new investment in the AWE facilities will result in large-scale changes to the existing facilities at Aldermaston. The removal of structures of historic interest due to their origins in WWII or the Cold War will result in a loss of information and a change to the character of the site. The Management Strategy produced by AWE is an important document, and it will be necessary to ensure that managers, planners, architects, etc involved in future development are aware of this and abide by its principles.
- The potential impact of development on the site to buried archaeological features should also be considered as an issue within this zone.
- The condition and management of the historic (Registered) park will need close monitoring. Significant alteration should be resisted and opportunities to enhance the character of the designed landscape should be encouraged.

Research Priorities

- What is the evidence for prehistoric activity in the zone?
- What is the date and function of Grim's Ditch? How does it relate to the late Iron Age and Roman activity at Silchester?
- Can the location and nature of the Saxon and medieval settlement be established? How would this enhance our understanding of the development of the village?
- What are the origins of Aldermaston Park and is there any surviving evidence of the deer park? Does it contain features/information that could help explain the development of designed landscapes?
- How can remains of the WWII airfield help us understand the military thinking of this period? What survives of the WWII fabric and how significant is this?
- What archaeological evidence is contained at the site for the Cold War development of Britain's nuclear arsenal? Can the recording of structures prior to demolition unlock important new data about the processes involved in this industry?