

SMW Stratfield Mortimer, Wokefield

Historic Character

This is a sparsely settled, predominantly rural zone of irregularly-shaped fields, small wooded areas and a number of parklands. The zone is served by a network of tracks and narrow roads which has created a sinuous agricultural landscape. Much of the framework of the landscape dates back to before the 18th century as most settlements, fields and tracks were in existence by this time. Changes in farming have led to modification of the majority of the historic enclosures, but these changes have not significantly altered the grain of the landscape. A section of Wokefield Park has been converted to a golf course; this has led to extensive modification of the landscape park and large-scale new building around the Wokefield Park house itself.

Historically settlement was fairly sparse and characterised by hamlets at Stratfield Mortimer and Beech Hill, common edge settlements at Grazeley Green and Goddard's Green, and a scatter of farmsteads in between. There has been only modest growth in housing across the zone and most of it has been small in scale and has occurred around the historic settlement at Beech Hill. The most tangible change that has occurred on the northern boundary of this zone is the foundation of the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) at Burghfield. However, unlike AWE Aldermaston, this has not attracted settlement or industrial estates to its fringes and is essentially an island of military development in an otherwise rural landscape. Despite significant changes to the fieldscapes most of the SMW zone retains a rural and historic feel.

Historic Environment

Some archaeological survey work focussing on the Kennet and Loddon valleys has been carried out in the zone, but there has been very little excavation. Evidence for all periods has been documented in this zone, mainly by finds, but the zone lacks any real concentrations of activity from any particular period. Roman activity is best documented by roads running through or along the edge of the zone and a probable pottery manufacturing site has been located at Wokefield. It is likely that this zone would have been well-exploited during the Roman period as it lies adjacent to the Roman town at Silchester and is crossed by routes connecting it to other settlements. The Roman road from Silchester to London, also called the Devil's Highway, forms most of the southern boundary of this HECZ and notably also the county boundary with Hampshire.

The zone is known to have been occupied in the early medieval period, but the form and location of settlement is unclear. It is possible that the present hamlets have their roots in this period and this is hinted at by a Saxon grave slab in the churchyard at Stratfield Mortimer. Late medieval and post-medieval evidence is concentrated on Stratfield Mortimer and Beech Hill and a series of deer parks. Deer parks were established at Wokefield and Stratfield Mortimer, and elements of them are still present within the landscape although their precise extents are unknown. The Priory at Beech Hill is thought to be the site of Stratfield Saye Priory but it is unclear whether any structures relating to the priory survive. A medieval settlement is known to have existed at Wokefield dating back at to Domesday but the form of this settlement is unclear as it no longer exists. It is thought that the settlement was removed and its site incorporated into Wokefield Park when the landscape park was created in the 18th century.

There are about 30 listed buildings in this zone and the majority are in and around Beech Hill and Stratfield Mortimer; they include two Grade II* listed buildings designed by Brunel at Mortimer Station on the branch line between Reading and Basingstoke. There are no other nationally designated sites in this zone, and no Conservation Areas.

Historic Environment Character Zone

Historic Environment Potential

The zone is not developed on a large scale and there has been little opportunity to test the presence or absence of buried archaeology through excavation. The archaeological potential of this zone is very hard to assess. It is likely that deposits relating to prehistoric and Roman activity could be encountered across the whole zone, but it not possible to be more specific about the nature, preservation and location of any such deposits on the basis of present evidence. Deposits relating to early and later medieval activity are likely within settlements and these may be well-preserved as recent development has not been particularly intensive.

Historic Environment Action Plan

Conservation Issues

- The zone is largely rural with a good survival of field patterns dating back to the late medieval or early post medieval period. It is questionable whether the zone is capable of absorbing any significant areas of new development activity without seriously undermining this character.
- The historic settlements are of a linear nature strung along winding lanes through the landscape. Settlement density is low. New development should be focussed on existing settlements and should be designed to blend with the historic pattern.
- There are only a few archaeological sites that survive as visible features. The full significance of archaeological sites should be determined on a case by case basis.
- More information on the character of settlements and buildings in this zone is required. Details of materials, style, size, etc is needed to inform conservation and planning policy.

Research Priorities

- Does evidence for prehistoric and Roman activity within the zone survive?
- Can the line of the Roman road from Silchester to Dorchester-on-Thames be established? Can further detail be established on the minor Roman road in Beech Hill parish?
- Did a pre-conquest settlement exist at Mortimer?
- Can the medieval settlement at Wokefield be found?
- What was the scale and status of the monastic house at Stratfield Saye?
- What was the extent of the deer parks at Wokefield and Stratfield Mortimer? Can any evidence of structures, hunting lodges, etc, associated with these deer parks be found?
- 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 of the farmsteads in the zone?
- What are the origins of Wokefield Park? Does it contain features/information that could help explain the development of designed landscapes?