

WVU Winterbourne Valley - Upper

Character

This is an arable area at the head of the Winterbourne valley containing the historic settlements of Brightwalton and Farnborough. Historically, the area was a mix of open field and common downland grazing, with some ancient woodland. Some of the downland and all of the open field had been enclosed into regular and irregularly-shaped fields by the 18th century. These were probably created through a mix of agreement between farmers and piecemeal enclosure. The remaining downland north of Farnborough was enclosed into fields by Act of Parliament in the early 19th century, leaving only one patch of grassland at Farnborough Furze Down. Large blocks of ancient woodland existed on the parish boundary east of Brightwalton. Most settlement was in the nucleated villages at Farnborough and Brightwalton. Brightwalton parish also contains a group of hamlets south of the village. Other settlement was sparse and consisted of a hamlet at Lilley and Roughdown Farm.

There has been major change since the mid-20th century as most historic fields have been altered as a result of the shift to mechanised farming. Much field alteration was by boundary removal and, in some places, stubs of these boundaries remain. Some relatively unaltered fields remain and most are south and east of Brightwalton. Around half of each ancient wood, Lilley Copse, Hemley Copse and Sparrowbill Copse, has been cleared of native tree cover and replanted with other species. These now have a different tree-cover, lack the biodiversity of ancient woodlands and clearance may have damaged historic wood features. New tree-plantations are rare with only a few scattered across the area. There has been almost no settlement growth.

Historic Environment

HER records are dominated by findspots and buildings and are sparsely distributed with small concentrations at Farnborough and Brightwalton. The area was covered by both the National Mapping Programme and the Berkshire Downs Survey. Little other archaeological work has been carried out and is limited to one watching brief in each village and an evaluation at Brightwalton. There are no scheduled ancient monuments in the area.

Evidence of prehistoric activity is very limited. No Palaeolithic finds have been recorded from the area and only one possible Mesolithic flint tool has been found. Neolithic material is also scarce and consists of finds of small quantities of flintwork at Farnborough Down recovered during fieldwalking by the Berkshire Downs Survey. Early Bronze Age flintwork was also found at this site. Bronze Age records are more common, but still not widespread and consist of a find of a socketed axe at Brightwalton and ring ditches at Farnborough and Brightwalton Holt. No definite Iron Age material has been recovered yet and activity of this period is documented only by cropmarks of later prehistoric/ Romano-British field systems found in small patches across the area.

Some Roman finds, coins from Furze Down and pottery from around Farnborough, have been found in the north of the area but, again, activity of this period is mainly documented by the cropmarks of field systems. Human remains were found at Brightwalton Holt in 1887. This consisted of about a dozen skeletons, some headless, and was initially interpreted as a burial related to the Civil War. It has been suggested that these burials may be Romano-British as decapitation was a common feature in burials of this period.

Historic Environment Character Zone

There is good evidence for early medieval settlement at Farnborough and Brightwalton. Both settlements were referred to in 10th century documents and in Domesday, and All Saint's Church in Farnborough contains some 11th century elements. Minor evidence of activity in the area comes from the find of a coin of Alfred near Farnborough village. It has been suggested that an old chalk pit at the southern edge of the area on the boundary of Brightwalton and Leckhampstead parishes may be early medieval. The pit has been identified with Buccan Crundel, a pit named in the Anglo-Saxon bounds list of Leckhampstead.

Three late medieval buildings exist in the area: All Saint's Church, Farnborough, and 15th and 16th century cottages at Brightwalton Green. In addition to the 11th century elements, All Saint's Church also has a 15th century tower. It is unclear when the hamlets in the area developed. Brightwalton Green contains late medieval buildings, but it is unclear how long prior to the 15th century it was established. It is possible that Lilley and Brightwalton Holt were established in this period. Farnborough seems to have contracted since the late medieval period and earthworks of medieval building platforms exists immediately south of the village. A substantial part of a large moat around the Manor Farm and medieval church site exists at Brightwalton. The medieval church was demolished in the 1860s and a church built on a new site to the west. The medieval graveyard still exists at Manor Farm.

All post-medieval records are of buildings and there are 24 listed buildings in the area. Most are at Farnborough and Brightwalton with a few at Brightwalton Green and one at Lilley. This pattern is to be expected as most settlement was in the villages, but the total absence of listed structures from Brightwalton Holt is odd. The vast majority of listed structures are domestic buildings and most are 17th century cottages although 15th-16th century and 18th century cottages and houses also survive. The churches and schools of each village are also listed. There are two notable unlisted buildings, Roughdown Farm and Brightwalton's 19th century rectory. Roughdown Farm is a significant building as it is the only settlement not in a village or hamlet and is recorded by the HER as a complex of 17th century buildings. Brightwalton Rectory was built by the same architect as its church and school at around the same time. The three buildings form a notable Victorian group in the village and it seems odd that the Rectory it is the only one that is unlisted.

Conservation Areas have been established at Farnborough, which takes in most of the modern village, the eastern and western parts of Brightwalton and part of Brightwalton Green.

Historic Environment Potential

The archaeological potential of this area as a whole is hard to assess. The area has the same geology and soils and similar levels of archaeological research as neighbouring areas, however, its HER records, though similar, are significantly fewer and it is unclear why this is the case. It is possible that ploughing since the medieval period may have removed deposits leaving only the patchy scatter of cropmark features. Deposits of Bronze Age to Romano-British date are likely to exist where there are cropmarks of ring ditches or field-systems but is unclear whether deposits extend into un-cropmarked areas. The quality of any deposits is unknown since no features of this type have been investigated in this area. Deposits of early occupation may survive within historic settlement nuclei and could be crucial to understanding the development of settlement in this area. Deposits in the medieval village earthworks at Farnborough will be valuable as desertion is a poorly understood phenomenon in the district. The historic building stock is well-studied but it is likely that further significant buildings or structural elements may be identified, particularly within the hamlets.

Historic Environment Action Plan

Conservation Issues

- The open aspect of this zone is part of its historic character; will this be maintained with changing agricultural practices?
- Intensive modern agriculture threatens the resource on buried archaeological sites, of particular reference in this respect are the late Prehistoric banjo enclosures in this zone.
- Settlements are traditionally small and scattered. Development pressure may lead to settlement expansion that erodes this character.
- There are a small number of earthwork archaeological monuments that require careful management to ensure their preservation.
- A Conservation Area appraisals and management plans for Farnborough, Brightwalton and Brightwalton Green are overdue.
- More detail is needed on the historic building stock to ensure appropriate policies are put in place to conserve this resource. Of particular relevance is the small number of listed buildings which does not appear to be an accurate reflection of the significance of the building stock in some of the hamlets.
- 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.

Research Priorities

- What was the nature of land use in the earlier Prehistoric period?
- Does the absence of evidence create a true picture of early activity in this zone?
- Where are the Romano-British settlements and how do they relate to the extensive field systems?
- What date are the burials from Brightwalton Holt?
- Where were the early medieval (Saxon) settlements? What were their origins and how do they relate to the later medieval settlement pattern?
- Why do medieval settlements show signs of shrinkage in this zone? What information do these deserted settlements contain for understanding how medieval population utilised the landscape?
- Do the surviving settlements represent surviving medieval foci?
- Why was the moat at Brightwalton so large? How did this function in an area not traditionally associated with this type of monument?
- Do the historic buildings in the zone contain any information about post-medieval and modern changes to land use and agricultural systems?