

## **SG Sulham Gap**

### **Topography, Geology and Soils**

This is an area comprising low-lying marshy land around the Pang and the Sulham Brook and the slope of the Thames watershed at Reading. The geology is mostly chalk, overlain around the watercourses by extensive valley gravels. The watershed is composed of Reading Beds overlain by London Clay and capped by plateau gravels. Loamy argyillic gley soils are present around the Pang and Sulham Brook with clay palaeo-argyillic brown earths on the watershed.

### **Historic Landscape**

This area was well-wooded and characterised by early enclosure fields and a dispersed settlement pattern. The majority of fields were irregularly shaped early enclosures with a small block of regularly shaped early enclosures immediately northeast of Sulham. The regular enclosures were enclosed from an area of open field and probably resulted from an agreement between local land-holders and farmers. There was no trace of an open field system having operated in the rest of the area.

Many small to medium sized woods were present in the area and most have been identified as ancient woodland. Woods were fairly evenly distributed across most of the area.

The historic settlement pattern of the area was a mix of small hamlets, such as Sulham and North Street, and numerous small farms. Most farms were named after their occupiers suggesting that they belonged to peasant farmers who had taken it upon themselves to enclose the land. 'Mead', 'Moors' and 'Clay' (usually applied to heavy, hard to work land), appear as elements in place names around the Sulham Brook and this probably indicates that the low-lying land around the brook was a marsh or moor prior to enclosure.

### **Modern Landscape**

There have been varying degrees of change in this area: whilst fieldscapes have been substantially altered and recent leisure developments have had an effect on the area, there has been only some change to the extent of tree-cover and very little settlement growth. Historic enclosures have been subject to large-scale alteration across the area into modern fields more suited to mechanised agriculture. Many historic boundary features have been lost in this process but the grain of the landscape remains largely unchanged. A group of unaltered historic enclosures interspersed with woodland is present around Sulham and gives a good example of what the historic landscape of the area was like. The construction of the M4 motorway also contributed to the reorganisation of the landscape by disrupting and truncating historic field systems.

About half of the known ancient woods have been cleared of native tree cover and replanted with other species. These remain as wooded areas but have lost much of their ancient woodland features and biodiversity value. New areas of woodland are rare and include a couple of plantations and some small areas of secondary woodland that have developed on the fringes of historic woods. The new wooded areas are small and mainly attached to existing woods so largely fit with the grain of the landscape and have not altered the character of the area.

### *Historic Environment Character Area*

Despite being located next to Reading and the M4 this area has largely escaped the effects of settlement sprawl in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some new housing has been constructed at Sulham and on the fringes of Tidmarsh but there has been little growth around other historic settlement nuclei. A single wholly new settlement, consisting of Malpas Farm and Pond Farm, has been constructed adjacent to the M4 near North Street.

A large area of fields near North Street has been developed into a golf course and this is the most tangible way in which the rapid development and urbanisation seen in surrounding areas has affected this area. The golf course retains a flavour of the area's past as many boundaries of the fields that occupied the area are preserved as features within the course.