

VSE Valleys South East

Topography, Geology and Soils

This is an area of varied topography comprising the junction of several valley systems, including the Enborne, Kennet, and Foudry Brook. London Clays exist on the bases and lower slopes of the valleys and are overlain by gravels around the rivers and larger streams. The watersheds and upper valley slopes are composed of Bagshot Beds with extensive cappings of plateau gravels. Stony, sandy podzols and brown sands exist across the majority of the area, with a substantial area of clay stagnogley soils around Burghfield, Stratfield Mortimer and Beech Hill. On the valley floor, heavy clay alluvial gleys exist east of Aldermaston with silty, humic alluvial gley soils with peat deposits to the west.

Historic Landscape

This was a well-wooded area of fields, extensive commons, dispersed settlements and parklands. A dense network of roads and tracks ran through the area creating a fine-grained, intimate landscape. The majority of the area was enclosed into fields by the 18th century and most were irregularly-shaped, indicating that they were probably created on a piecemeal basis. No clear traces of an open field system have been found in this area and it is likely that this was an area characterised by small fields and farms throughout the medieval period. Large areas of assarts existed on the edges of the extensive common between Mortimer, Padworth and Silchester and these probably represent intakes from the common land. Blocks of regularly-shaped early enclosures were found around Ufton Nervet and Beech Hill; these were probably created following an agreement between local land-holders, farmers and commoners to enclose woodland or common grazing.

Commons of varying sizes were found across the area with the largest examples situated adjacent to the Hampshire border. By the 18th century these were the only non-wooded areas that had not been enclosed into fields. Almost all of the common land was enclosed by Act of Parliament over the later 18th and early 19th century. Small stubs of Padworth and Burghfield Commons were left unenclosed, however, and remained open into the 20th century.

Large woods existed across the western and central portions of the area with woodland cover becoming much sparser to the east. Most woods were ancient semi-natural woodlands and examples of these existed across the area. The most extensive ancient woods were between Brimpton and Ufton Nervet. Areas of other old woods were also present but were more frequent in central and eastern parts of the area. The largest of these were around Aldermaston and Padworth.

Settlement was fairly dense, with small villages and hamlets such as Ufton Nervet and Mortimer being the commonest form of settlement. Some of these were poly-focal settlements consisting of more than one settlement nucleus, such as those in Sulhampstead (now Sulhamstead) parish. Common-edge settlements, such as Round Oak, Borson and Burghfield Common, were also an important component of the settlement pattern. Aldermaston was the only large nucleated village and is an exception to the overall pattern of settlement. Farms were sparsely distributed across the western

Historic Environment Character Area

part of the area, becoming commoner east of Aldermaston; many are named after places or topographic features.

Many deer parks were established in this area during the medieval period; all had come under other uses by the 18th century. The two parks at Stratfield Mortimer became Great Park Farm and Little Park Farm and sections of their park pales probably formed field boundaries. The parks at Aldermaston, Ufton and Wokefield became the nuclei of designed landscapes in the 17th and 18th century. Landscape parks were common features of the area, ranging in size from the very large, such as at Wasing, to small formal parks around manor houses, as at Ufton Court.

The Modern Landscape

Modern farming has led to significant changes in this area. Most early enclosures have been re-organised or amalgamated into larger, more regular fields better suited to mechanised farming. Unaltered early enclosures are found across the area but these are usually present only in small groups amidst modernised fields. Few assarts or Parliamentary enclosures remain and most have had woodland plantations established on them. This process was already underway by the late 19th century at Ufton Nerve and Mortimer Common. Many other Parliamentary enclosures were developed into housing. Arable cultivation has been extended into previously non-arable areas including woodland and parkland. Large areas at Padworth House and Wasing Park have been enclosed into fields. A large number of paddocks have been created, most as accommodation for hobby/pet ponies and horses and usually on the fringes of settlements. These paddocks can have the effect of suburbanising the areas around villages by extending the settled feel of the landscape further into the countryside.

There has been a large increase in tree-cover across the whole of the area despite clearance of historic woodlands. Large plantations have been created and woodland regeneration has led to areas of secondary woodland developing. Small areas of ancient woodland have been cleared for housing and agriculture across the area, some as recently as the 1990s. Loss of other old woods is greater and large areas have been cleared between Aldermaston and Padworth. Much of this was for agriculture but some was for military storage facilities, paddocks and small-scale industry. In addition to clearance for farming and development, several areas were cleared of native tree cover and replanted with other species. This is commonest between Crookham and Brimpton Common, and between Padworth and Ufton Nerve. The most significant change in woodland is the creation of two large plantations in the centre of the area. Both plantations were created on areas of Parliamentary enclosed commons, perhaps because the land was too poor to support profitable agriculture. Although this HECA was historically well-wooded, these have caused a major increase in tree-cover and led to the central part of the area becoming much more visually enclosed than previously. Many other small plantations have been established across the area and most have slotted into the existing grain of the landscape.

Gravel extraction has been less extensive than in *KVW* but has still had an effect on the area. Mineral extraction is ongoing at Raghill and Brimpton Common and on a small scale at other locations. Some disused pits have been restored to arable; however, the fields are not the same as those that existed prior to quarrying and represent the creation of a new fieldscape. A large area at Sulhamstead Bannister and Sulhamstead

Historic Environment Character Area

Abbots has been restored to fields and is noticeably more regular than neighbouring fields.

An immense amount of military development has taken place during the 20th century with the construction of the two Atomic Weapons Establishments at Aldermaston and Burghfield. Both bases originated in the Second World War, as an airfield and an Ordnance factory respectively, and largely erased earlier land-uses on their sites. AWE Aldermaston was constructed at Aldermaston Park and a few traces of the park's landscaping, including a decoy pond, remain within the complex but AWE Burghfield was built over an area of irregularly-shaped early enclosures and a farm, and no evidence of that landscape is now visible. Further military storage areas are found around Padworth.

Significant housing growth has occurred and much of it was driven by the need for housing for the workforce at the defence establishments. Most development has occurred at Mortimer and Burghfield Common and has created two large "urban" islands in the countryside. These new settlements have swamped the pre-existing small historic settlement nuclei. Remaining settlement growth is a mix of development on the fringes of historic settlements and the creation of new housing at previously undeveloped locations. Much of the new development in historic settlements has been constructed on an ad-hoc basis and has led to infilling between settlements or between a settlement's separate foci. Coupled with the suburbanising effect of paddocks, this has caused settlements to grow together creating village-like communities where previously there were only small dispersed hamlets, as at Brimpton, Brimpton Common, Burghfield and Beech Hill. The creation of new settlements is common and is characterised by large farmhouses or by the construction of one or a small group of large houses on rural plots.

Most parks have experienced change in use or shrinkage, with only a few of the smaller parks remaining more or less intact. Most large parks have shrunk back to a smaller area of grounds around the main house and large areas of former grounds have been turned over to agriculture or paddocks. Parks have been re-used for purposes such as educational facilities and golf courses; Aldermaston Park has been split between AWE and commercial use as a hotel. Despite these changes, elements of landscaping survive at many parks including Sulhamstead House and Wasing.

Much of the framework of the landscape remains intact and the area largely retains a historic feel, but this is actually a very fragmentary landscape whose character is on verge of permanent alteration.