

## *Historic Environment Character Zone*

### **WMH Woolhampton, Midgham, Hartshill**

#### **Historic Character**

This is a rural zone occupying the northern valley side between Thatcham and Woolhampton. The A4 is the major roadway through the zone and has a long history, part of which was as the London to Bath coaching route. Many small roads and tracks link the farms and settlements with the valley floor and Bucklebury Common to the north. Historically the zone was a mix of nucleated settlements amongst open fields, and smaller areas of hamlets and scattered farms set within early enclosures and woodland. The majority of the open field was enclosed into fields by the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the remaining areas were enclosed by Act of Parliament in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most wooded areas were ancient semi-natural woods, and lay within gullies running from Bucklebury Common to the Kennet. The largest woods were around Woolhampton and Hartshill. Sizeable landscape parks were sited at Woolhampton Park and Midgham Park. Woolhampton was the largest settlement and lay at the junction of routes across and along the Kennet Valley. During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries small settlements grew up along what is now the A4 to serve coach traffic along the road. The fields, woods and road network gave a distinctive sinuous grain to the landscape.

Agricultural change from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century onwards has had a significant effect on the zone. Fields have either been re-organised or had their boundaries removed to create more regularly-shaped holdings better suited to mechanised agriculture. Most fields have been modified and few examples of unaltered historic fields remain. The arable extent has also increased as cultivation extended into previously non-arable areas, including part of Midgham and Woolhampton Parks. Woolhampton Park has seen further changes; the house and sections of the park are now a school, and housing has been built in the south-west corner. Housing growth has focussed around Midgham and Woolhampton, mostly constructed on an ad-hoc basis consisting of infill and expansion around the historic settlement nucleus. Formal housing estate developments are rare. Woolhampton has seen the most growth and is now approximately three times its original size. Despite substantial change the grain of the landscape is largely unaltered, and the zone as a whole retains a historic feel. This however could be easily compromised if new development and land-use changes do not take account of the historic character of this zone.

#### **Historic Environment**

There is a high density of HER records within this zone, but only limited archaeological work has been carried out. The Lower Kennet Valley Survey carried out fieldwalking across the zone, and some trial trenching was carried out prior to the development of a golf course at Colthrop Manor Farm, but little other investigation has taken place.

Prehistoric activity has been recorded across most of the zone and is documented by findspots, artefact scatters and some probable prehistoric cropmarked features. Much of the material is not closely datable. The highest density of material comes from the Colthrop Farm area, perhaps just due to the archaeological investigation here, and includes several artefact scatters that may be indicative of settlement or activity sites. The density and widespread nature of the material suggest that the zone was generally well-used during the period. It is likely that the kind of settlement and farming activity identified in adjacent zones was also present here.

Roman material is relatively uncommon in this zone and is represented by a handful of findspots and a single artefact scatter. This paucity of remains is unexpected as the zone lies just to the north of Ermin Street and several settlement sites have been excavated in adjacent zones. The

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nature of land-use in this period is unclear but it is possible that the settlement and farming activity seen in adjacent zones extended into this zone.

Early medieval evidence is extremely scarce and consists of references to Midgham and Woolhampton in Domesday. The physical remains of these settlements have yet to be discovered and their location and nature is unclear, but they are assumed to have been at or near the present villages. There is slightly more late medieval evidence in the form of findspots, cultivation remains and documentary references. Settlement at Midgham and Woolhampton continued throughout this period, although no deposits or structural remains have yet been located. It is thought that both settlements developed into something resembling their present form during this period. Colthrop Manor is known from documentary references and its site is thought to be that of Colthrop Farm. Documentary references to a deer park at Woolhampton exist, and although no physical remains have been discovered, it is assumed to have lain within the later landscaped park.

Post- medieval evidence comes mainly from structures and buildings. Many are listed, the majority being domestic buildings or park components in Woolhampton or Woolhampton Park. Many of the components of Woolhampton Park are listed, unlike Midgham Park which has only one listed building; neither park is a Registered Park or Garden. The churches at Woolhampton and Midgham, both 19<sup>th</sup> century structures, are also listed. Listed buildings are uncommon in the other settlements; there are none in Hartshill, and farm buildings are also poorly represented. A small part of Woolhampton, adjacent to the canal, is designated as a Conservation Area.

### **Historic Environment Potential**

The zone has not been developed on a large scale and sub-surface archaeology is likely to survive, although the nature and quality of any deposits is hard to estimate based on the available evidence. If deposits relating to earlier settlements are encountered within the current settlements they will make a significant contribution to understanding the origin and nature of these villages. The importance of elements of some buildings has been recognised through listing, however the historic building stock as a whole has undergone little assessment and the potential for the identification of further significant buildings or structural elements is high.

### **Historic Environment Action Plan**

#### Conservation Issues

- Intensive modern agriculture threatens the resource on buried archaeological sites.
- Continued intensive gravel extraction from deposits on valley sides.
- More detail is needed on the historic building stock to ensure appropriate policies are put in place to conserve this resource.
- Conservation Area appraisal required for Woolhampton.
- Management of Kennet and Avon canal and possible impacts on surviving early fabric of locks, bridges, etc.
- Ancient woodland has not been well managed in recent years and this poses a threat to its survival.
- Management of WWII features.

#### Research Priorities

- Can the Kennet Valley Survey data be used to model archaeological sites in this zone?

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- Does the general spread of prehistoric material across the zone represent settlement activity? Where are prehistoric settlements most likely to occur?
- Where are the Romano-British settlements? What was their character and function?
- Where was the early medieval settlement and how substantial was it?
- Does evidence survive for the scale and character of the medieval settlement? What was the nature of the settlement at Colthrop Manor?
- Can Woolhampton Deer Park be located?
- What are the origins of the farmsteads in the zone?
- Do the historic buildings in the zone contain any information about post-medieval and modern changes to land use and agricultural systems?
- Can the surviving WWII defensive features in the Kennet Valleys help us understand the military and political history of that period?