

CRP Commons and Ridges – Prehistoric

Historic Character

This is a heavily wooded rural zone lying on the south side of the Pang - Kennet watershed. Historically, the landscape was composed of a mix of small fields with hamlets and farms set amongst large wooded areas. A dense network of roads and tracks linked these settlements to the Pang and Kennet and to commons on the watershed crest. The interplay of these routes and the land-use and topography created a very irregular grain to the landscape. Most fields were irregularly-shaped early enclosures, although a small area of 19th century fields existed where the designed parkland of Dunston Park was converted to fields following its abandonment. The zone was densely wooded and all woods have been identified as ancient woodlands, the largest being Carbins Wood. Most settlement consisted of farmsteads although small hamlets existed at Kiff Green and Midgham Green.

Some changes have occurred in this zone since the mid-20th century, but these have not yet had a significant impact on its character. As with other areas, most historic fields have been rationalised through boundary removal and reorganisation into fields better suited to modern mechanised agriculture, and large areas of paddocks have also been created. Areas of historic fields survive around Kiff Green and at Dunston Park.

Some change in tree-cover has also occurred. Despite clearance of blocks of ancient woodland at Midgham Green for housing, ancient woods have not been substantially altered. Several plantations have been created; most are not large in extent and are on the edge of ancient woods so have not led to a significant change in the wooded character of the zone. There has been some housing growth around Kiff Green and Midgham Green, typified by developments of a few large houses, and this area now has a considerably more settled feel. The biggest area of recent development is at Douai Abbey. Douai Abbey is a community of Benedictine monks that was established in 1903 and grew to include a school occupying an extensive site on the fringe of the area near Woolhampton. The school buildings have recently been converted into housing, with new residential units being erected in the grounds. Quarrying to exploit plateau gravels is also taking place at Hartshill. Extraction is currently only occurring at this one site, but the establishment of further workings could have a significant impact on the zone's character.

Historic Environment

HER records are fairly dense in this zone and are dominated by findspots. Records are not evenly distributed and most records are at the eastern and western ends of the zone and few in the centre. This is unsurprising as most records come from fieldwalking on arable fields by the Lower Kennet Valley Survey and the gap in records correlates with most densely wooded part of the zone. Significant excavations took place before quarrying at Hartshill but, apart from this and fieldwalking, there has been little other work carried out across the zone.

A significant degree of earlier prehistoric activity is indicated by large amounts of flintwork recovered by fieldwalking. Although much of the material is poorly dated, some foci of activity have been located in this zone. The precise date and nature of these activity sites is unclear as none have been subject to further research. Later prehistoric evidence has been found at several sites and includes the remains of a late Bronze Age settlement and related cremation cemetery excavated at Hartshill. This site is highly important as it also produced the earliest iron-working evidence so far located in the British Isles. Evidence of Bronze Age occupation was also discovered in the east of the zone during evaluation prior to construction of Beenham Golf Course. Evidence of Iron Age activity has been recovered from the west of the zone,

Historic Environment Character Zone

particularly near Ramsbury hillfort in the north-west corner. This site however is now mostly ploughed out and partial excavation did not locate any features. Features from an early Iron Age settlement were found during excavations prior to construction at Dunston Park in the south-west corner of the zone.

Romano-British material, including two artefact scatters, has been found at several locations across the zone. Occupation of this period has been found at Hartshill where features from a 3rd to 4th century settlement were excavated. The scale of activity during this period is unclear and further Romano-British deposits may exist in the zone.

Few medieval features have been recorded from this zone; some finds of late medieval pottery were recovered during fieldwalking but were probably related to manuring practices rather than settlement activity. The lack of features probably reflects the fact that most of the zone was either wooded or farmland during these periods. It is possible that the farmsteads and hamlets in the zone came into existence during the medieval period but little is known of their origin and history. Some 16th century buildings, all listed, exist at Midgham Green, Hallplace Farm and Copyhold Farm and indicate that these, at least, were in existence by the close of the late medieval period.

With the exception of some surviving features of Dunston Park, all features of post-medieval date in the zone are standing buildings. There are 29 listed buildings, mostly 17th-18th century farm and domestic buildings, and mainly within historic settlement nuclei. Several elements of the Douai Abbey complex are also listed. The only listed building in the west of the zone is a 17th century timber-framed house near Hartshill. This reflects a general absence of extant historic settlement in this zone.

Historic Environment Potential

There is significant evidence for earlier and later prehistoric activity in this zone, and the potential for further below-ground archaeology for these periods is high. Much of this zone is covered by ancient woodland and it is probable that significant archaeological remains survive in these areas. On present evidence it is not possible to be more specific about the location, nature and quality of deposits of these periods. Medieval evidence is unlikely to be found across most of the zone but it is possible that the known historic settlements originated during these periods. Deposits relating to the early occupation may survive within the historic settlement nuclei and any such deposits could be crucial in understanding the development of settlement in this zone. The historic building stock is not extensive and, although many structures are listed, further significant structures may be identified.

Historic Environment Action Plan

Conservation Issues

- There is continued development pressure in the zone, much of it unsympathetic in scale and design. This could lead to further erosion of the historic character.
- There is significant archaeological potential in the zone that could be impacted upon by further quarrying and development activity.
- Ancient woodland has not been well managed in recent years and this poses a threat to its survival.
- Historic building stock is poorly understood and little protection is currently afforded to this resource.

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Research Priorities

- What is the nature and extent of Middle Bronze Age to later Iron Age settlement?
- Does the Hartshill metalworking site represent a larger industry present of other sites in the zone?
- Do the extensive tracts of woodland mask surviving archaeological sites and deposits?
- What are the date, function and significance of the historic buildings in the zone?