

Historic Environment Character Zone

WDNR Wooded Downs – not Roman

Historic Character

This is a sparsely occupied rural zone bisected into northern and southern parts by Ermin Street and its related Roman activity. The zone is a mix of arable fields and large woods and also contains some areas of parkland and studs. The M4 runs through the southern part of this zone.

Historically, the zone was characterised by irregularly-shaped assarts and fields and large blocks of ancient semi-natural woodland. The historic settlement pattern of the zone was dispersed and typified by scattered small farms. Much of this landscape is likely to date back at least to the medieval period. The zone was crossed by numerous small roads and tracks leading from the floors of the Kennet and Lambourn valleys up to the top of the watershed. The roads and irregularly-shaped fields and woods gave a very fluid, sinuous grain to the landscape.

Agricultural changes and the construction of the M4 have led to significant modification of the zone over the latter part of the 20th century. Landscapes have seen large scale rationalisation through a combination of field reorganisation and boundary removal, and this has created a much less irregular-looking landscape. The conversion of historic enclosures into paddocks is common and this is most widespread around the Kingwood Stud. Some blocks of historic fields survive around Lambourn Woodlands and East Garston Woodlands and south of King's Heath. Other elements of the landscape, such as woods, have not seen as much change.

Historic Environment

HER records are fairly sparse and there has been little archaeological work carried out on the ground. The zone was covered by both the Berkshire Downs Survey and the National Mapping Programme (NMP), but little excavation has taken place. The NMP mapped several groups of cropmark features thought to be part of later prehistoric/Romano-British field systems. Cropmarks interpreted as a possible Bronze Age barrow have been mapped west of North Hidden Farm, although predominantly Roman material was collected in the interior. However a barrow of more clearly Bronze Age date near Shefford Park Farm was excavated on at least two occasions. Other prehistoric material is not common and is mostly limited to finds of worked flint from a handful of locations. Despite being bisected by a significant Roman road, evidence of Romano-British activity in this zone is very limited apart from the possibly contemporary field systems, and consists of finds from three locations. Suggested early medieval evidence comes from an inhumation burial found near Horseclose Copse. Records of late medieval activity are also scarce and limited to two areas of lynchets north-east of Rooksnest Farm. A linear earthwork of possible medieval date, Hug Ditch, runs along the part of the boundary between this HECZ and LVSA to the east.

Later activity is documented predominantly by standing buildings. There are 16 listed buildings in the zone and this represents a high proportion of the historic building stock. The majority of listed buildings are farm buildings of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, with country houses at Rooksnest and Inholmes. As with the neighbouring HECZ WDR, Second World War military remains are found on land that was occupied by Membury airfield. Concrete runways remain within fields, and buildings related to the airfield are found over an extensive area to the north and east, many of which have been re-used for alternative, mainly industrial, uses.

Historic Environment Character Zone

Historic Environment Potential

It is hard to assess the archaeological resource in this zone as little is known of the extent and quality of below-ground deposits. It is likely that prehistoric and Romano-British deposits are present where cropmarks of field systems exist, but it is not clear how well the features represented survive. A woodland archaeology survey of banks and enclosures in Coldridge Copse suggests that there may be other unrecorded earthworks in other woods in this zone. It is unclear whether the early medieval burial was an isolated burial or part of a cemetery; if the latter, the rest of the burial ground is likely to exist within the area. The historic farm sites retain significant historic buildings and it is possible that deposits relating to early settlement and use of these sites may also remain. Any such deposits could be crucial in understanding the enclosure and exploitation of this zone from the medieval period onwards.

Historic Environment Action Plan

Conservation Issues

- The irregular pattern of fields, woods and roads are part of the historic character of this zone. Will this be changed with modern agricultural practices?
- Management of woodlands, conservation of surviving ancient woodlands and replacement of plantations with more mixed tree coverage.
- Intensive modern agriculture threatens the resource on buried archaeological sites
- Development of historic farms and farm buildings.
- Nature and condition of historic building stock
- Identify and record the various dispersed WWII features.

Research Priorities

- What is the nature of the Bronze Age activity identified at North Hidden Farm?
- Where are the Romano-British settlements and how do they relate to the extensive field systems and the Roman road?
- Does evidence survive on the nature and origins of the early medieval activity?
- What is the extent of the possible early medieval cemetery at Horseclose Copse?
- Do the historic farm buildings in the zone contain any information about post-medieval and modern changes to land use and agricultural systems?