

EKW Enborne-Kennet Watershed

Topography, Geology and Soils

This area is the eastern end of the watershed between the Enborne and Kennet. The watershed forms a pronounced ridge between the two rivers, rising steeply from the base of each valley to a substantial plateau over much of its length; its slopes are riven by numerous small gulleys creating a undulating land-surface. The lower slopes of the watershed are composed of London Clays overlain by localised gravel deposits at the base of the Enborne valley. The upper slopes and plateau are composed of Bagshot Beds almost entirely capped by plateau gravels. This gives rise to stony and sandy podzols and brown sands across the whole area.

Historic Landscape

Land-use was closely related to the topography and geology of the area. The gravelly plateau at the top of the watershed was covered by an extensive heathland common, whereas the slopes down to the valley bottoms were occupied by a mix of fields and woods. The common was actually composed of two contiguous areas of common heathland, Greenham Common and Crookham Common, which covered almost half of the HECA. The heathland may have been in existence for several millennia as it is thought that it was created due to the exhaustion of the area's poor soil by prehistoric farmers. The heathland was used as common grazing and a source of fuel from at least the medieval period and, unlike the majority of commons in the district, it remained unenclosed and in use into the 20th century. The route from Newbury to Kingsclere in Hampshire ran across the common between Burysbank and Knights Bridge on the Enborne.

Settlement was around the fringe of Greenham and Crookham Commons and few farms or other settlements were found at any distance from it. The majority of settlements were common-edge settlements, mostly situated on the southern edge of the common adjacent to the Enborne. Most settlements were characterised by small agglomerations of buildings and are believed to have their roots in medieval and later squatter occupation on the common fringe by those wishing to exploit the common's resources. The only settlement which differed from this lowly, unplanned pattern was Crookham. Crookham seems to be a hamlet composed of several small nuclei on the road serving the east side of the common, and it also had a manor house. The origins and development of Crookham are unclear.

The slopes of the ridge were covered by a mix of fields and woods. The majority of fields were irregular in shape, had been enclosed by the start of the 18th century and were sited on the less undulating areas between dry valleys. Most woodland areas were ancient semi-natural woodlands and existed within the bases of the gulleys forming sinuous woods snaking up from the valley floor to the plateau. A few small parklands were found around Crookham, the most extensive being that of Crookham House. The settlements along the Enborne were supported by a mix of assart fields and a strip of enclosed riverside meadows. The combination of woods, irregularly-shaped fields and the undulating landform gave a very sinuous, intimate character to the slopes of the watershed, in stark contrast to the openness of the heathland on the plateau.

Modern Landscape

A great degree of modification has taken place over the central and western parts of this area due largely to the establishment of the substantial and contentious USAF airbase at Greenham Common in the latter half of the 20th century. The base began its life when Greenham and Crookham Commons were requisitioned for use as an RAF airfield during the Second World War. The common was probably chosen as it was an open area conveniently sited on a several mile long ridge with a fairly flat top. Following the onset of the Cold War in the 1950s, the airfield became USAF Greenham Common and the base for nuclear bombers, and then Cruise missiles in the 1980s. This entailed a large amount of development and landscaping including the construction of further buildings and runways. Substantial new roads were constructed around the fenced perimeter of the base to replace the narrow lanes and tracks that had existed around the common, and a new stretch of the A339 along the south of the area provided a substitute for the blocked-up route from Newbury to Kingsclere. Following decommissioning of the base in 1994, much of the land was returned to the local authority (then Newbury District Council) in order to restore most of the site to common land, although the administrative and technical area by the south gate was purchased by the Greenham Common Trust for use as an enterprise park. Restoration has entailed removal of most of the runway and associated structures and, although a long-term project, some success has already been achieved with much of the site beginning to revert to heathland. The common is now a popular open space for local residents but still retains many tangible features of its military past such as the control tower. Military buildings within the Trust's New Greenham Park are gradually being altered and in some cases demolished.

Significant change has also occurred to areas on the fringes of the former airbase. Large sections of Greenham and Crookham Commons were not included within the base and left outside its perimeter. These have now become densely wooded areas due to a lack of grazing and management and have changed what were visually open areas into highly enclosed areas. The new roads that were built created a better link to Newbury than had existed previously and have attracted considerable development of new housing around the area's historic settlement nuclei. This is especially noticeable at Crookham and in the common-edge settlements along the Enborne. The grain of the landscape and the nature of land cover have been heavily altered by the above changes and the area is now different in character and feel to what it was historically.

There has been considerable change to fieldscapes in the east of the area, mostly rationalisation and reorganisation of historic fields to make them suited to mechanised agriculture. However, there has been little alteration to woods and no real change in the nature of land cover here so the overall grain of the landscape has not been heavily altered and this part of the HECA retains a historic, rural feel.