

WVD Winterbourne Valley and Downs

Topography, Geology and Soils

This is the Winterbourne valley and areas of the high downs formed by watersheds between the Lambourn, Winterbourne and Pang rivers. The geology is almost entirely chalk, although small outcrops of Reading Beds occur south of Leckhampstead and Chieveley. Most of the area is covered by clayey palaeo-argyllic brown earths with areas of flinty rendzinas around South Fawley and Farnborough. In the south east of the area where the geology is a mix of chalk and Reading Beds, soils are loamy argyllic brown earths with small areas of clay-loam stagnogleys.

Historic Landscape

Like neighbouring downland areas, the medieval landscape was composed of communities within open fields utilising common grazing on adjacent or nearby downland. Commons existed at Chaddleworth, Beedon and Rowbury, but these were not frequent features of downland areas. Most of the open field and some downland had been enclosed into private fields by the start of the 18th century. Most early enclosures were irregularly-shaped and slotted into the framework of the landscape that had been established by roads and tracks and open field boundaries. This suggests that they were enclosed on a gradual, piecemeal basis. Significant areas of more regularly-shaped early enclosures existed around Brightwalton, Catmore, Leckhampstead and Winterbourne. These were probably created following an agreement between local land-holders and farmers to rationalise and enclosure holdings in the common fields. The majority of remaining open fields, commons and downs were enclosed into fields through Act of Parliament in the early 19th century, and large areas of Parliamentary fields existed in Chaddleworth, Chieveley and Beedon. Some open field and larger areas of downland around Fawley and South Fawley remained unenclosed into the 20th century.

This was a much more wooded area than other parts of the downs and large blocks of ancient woodland and smaller blocks of other old woods were distributed across the area. Most wooded areas were located on or near parish boundaries.

The historic settlement pattern was mixed and consisted of a few nucleated villages and a larger number of hamlets and farms; some dispersed types of settlement were also present. The villages (Farnborough, Brightwalton, Peasemore and Chieveley) were located on the valley slopes on ridges overlooking the valley floor. Hamlets were widely scattered across the area but were a varied group containing small hamlets, such as Fawley and Catmore, and settlements consisting of multiple foci, such as Beedon, Leckhampstead and Bothampstead. Many parishes, such as Chaddleworth and Beedon, had no main central settlement but a series of small related hamlets instead. Farms were common across the centre of the area and most were named after topographic features or the nearest settlement. Parks however were relatively uncommon with only a handful (Woolley Park, Chaddleworth House, Winterbourne House and the adjoining Priors Court and Bradley Parks) existing in the area.

South of South Fawley the landscape was different, being comprised of irregularly-shaped fields and blocks of woodland with numerous small farms. It lacked traces of any open fields and most farms were named after individuals. This area may not have been

Historic Environment Character Area

part of the common farming regime but have been occupied by small farms and their fields throughout the medieval period.

Modern Landscape

The development of mechanised farming over the latter half of the 20th century led to substantial change in the area with most fields being heavily altered and the remaining areas of open field and downland enclosed. However, the reorganisation of the landscape has been less complete than in other parts of the district, and large and coherent areas of early enclosures remain across much of the HECA. Unlike surrounding areas, most field alteration has been through amalgamation of fields by boundary removal as opposed to re-organisation and insertion of new boundaries. This has preserved some of the grain of the historic landscape and, in many cases, stubs of removed boundaries remain and could be utilised in hedgerow replanting. A significant area of paddocks has been created out of early enclosures at Fawley.

Existing woodland has had mixed fortunes; much seems to have survived but several large blocks of ancient woodland have been cleared for agriculture. This is largely a later 20th century phenomenon; however, one wood was cleared in the late 19th century. Ancient woodlands at Brightwalton and Catmore have been cleared of native tree cover and replanted with other species. These plantations have a totally different tree-cover and lack the biodiversity of ancient woodlands; clearance is also likely to have damaged or removed historic features such as woodbanks. There has been a small growth in new tree-cover, mostly linear shelter plantations around Catmore. These do not fit with the established grain of the landscape.

All parks survive in some form in the landscape but large portions of parkland have come under arable cultivation. The adjoining parks at Priorscourt and Bradley have seen most change. All of Priorscourt Park is now under different usage, the grounds mainly under arable cultivation and the house itself used a school. Bradley Park is now a small stub around the house and the rest of the grounds are fields.

Substantial growth in housing has occurred around Chieveley in recent years, largely due to its proximity to the M4/A34 junction. Most of this growth is in the form of small housing estates that have been built on the edge of Chieveley itself and to the north at Downend. Historically these were two separate settlement nuclei, but recent development has linked them, effectively creating one village. Little growth in settlement has occurred across the rest of the area and is mainly limited to ad-hoc infill and growth or construction of small housing developments in and around existing settlements, such as at Chaddleworth, Peasemore and Leckhampstead.