

Historic Environment Character Zone

GCC Greenham and Crookham Commons

Historic Character

This zone is defined by the 1980s extent of the former Greenham Common USAF airbase, excluding some areas of woodland that lay within the security fencing. The Second World War airfield was predominantly on Greenham Common, but its successor was extended into land previously covered by Crookham Commons and also took in a small area of pre-18th century fields and parkland at Crookham House. The establishment of the post-war base entailed large-scale construction, excavation and landscaping which included building bomb-proof missile shelters and what was at the time Europe's longest runway. The base was one of the most nationally recognised and well-known Cold War sites. This was due in large part to the controversy generated by hosting America's Cruise missiles and the notoriety it gained as the focus of long-term anti-nuclear protests including the women's peace camps. Following decommissioning of the base in 1994, much of the land was returned to local authority ownership with the intention of restoring the majority of the site to a public area of open common. The Greenham Common Trust took over the former administrative area by the south gate. The street layout and some military buildings here were retained and these now form the nucleus of New Greenham Park, a mixed business and industrial area. On the common, most military structures were removed, including the immense concrete runway and subterranean fuel tanks; practically the entire airbase perimeter fence has also been removed.

Although the re-establishment of the common is a very long-term project, some success has already been achieved with the much of the zone reverting to heathland and scrub under managed grazing. The common is now a popular open space for the local community and is used more for its leisure value than for traditional commoners' practices. The common has an artificial boundary near Crookham House where areas that were previously fields have been 'restored' to common. On the common itself the Cruise missile shelters and the control tower remain, the axes of runways and service roads are still clearly visible on the ground several years after their removal and much of the ground-surface is artificially levelled. The degree of landscaping involved in the construction and removal of the military features has left a permanent mark on this landscape that has a significant impact on its character, despite attempts to return it to a more 'natural' state.

Historic Environment

Following decommissioning, some military structures were demolished without record, but much of New Greenham Park has been subject to detailed archaeological investigation and recording. The Ground Launched Cruise Missiles Alert and Maintenance Area (GAMA) was also designated as a Scheduled Monument in recognition of its national importance as a Cold War site. Knowledge of periods prior to the 20th century, however, is very poor despite the fact that the zone was well-utilised in the past. Prehistoric farming and resultant soil exhaustion is thought to have been responsible for the creation of the heathland itself, and it is likely that the medieval use of the zone as a grazing and fuel resource, and perhaps the site of small industries, has its roots in the Roman period. It is likely that archaeological deposits relating to these phases of use were present but the scarcity of archaeological evidence observed across adjacent zones is even more pronounced here.

There are only a few non-military features recorded by the Historic Environment Record within this zone, and all have been partially or completely removed by construction associated with the base. The largest monument was the linear earthwork Bury's Bank, which ran for at least 350m across Greenham Common, although it may have continued down Alderbridge Gully. Limited

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survey and excavation was carried out prior to its demolition in 1941; two Roman vessels were recovered from its ditch. No archaeological monitoring seems to have been carried out when a smaller cross ridge dyke at Crookham Common was affected by later construction works on the base, and five undated circular structures west of Bury's Bank are only known from antiquarian reports. In the late 19th century the commons began to be used more for recreation, and one of the earliest English golf courses existed on Crookham Common, although there is little evidence of its layout. A clubhouse, inn and tea house were among several buildings demolished to make way for the first runway. The dearth of known non-military archaeology is probably due to a combination of land-use (since heathland cover can give little indication of the presence of buried archaeology) and a lack of opportunity for discovery during construction work.

Historic Environment Potential

The potential for non-military archaeology is likely to be very low due to truncation and levelling activities across the zone during base construction. Although military structures remain on the site it is unclear what further information can be gained from them.

Historic Environment Action Plan

Conservation Issues

- Management of woodlands, conservation of surviving ancient woodlands and replacement of plantations with more mixed tree coverage.
- Poorly understood archaeological resource.
- Conservation of surviving elements of military period.
- Development pressure in New Greenham Park.
- Management of GAMA site.
- Interpretation and understanding of zone as a product of human intervention.

Research Priorities

- What evidence survives of early prehistoric and Roman exploitation of this landscape?
- How can recording of the military features help explain the development of the airfield in the context of international events?
- Does anything survive of Bury's Bank in the gullies?
- Can any elements of the earliest inland golf course in England be seen on Greenham or Crookham Commons?