

HCFM Hungerford Common – Freeman’s Marsh

Historic Character

This is a zone of common grazing land on the western edge of Hungerford; it is the only surviving area of common meadow in the district. Like the Hungerford Port Down Common on the east of the town (HECZ HCPD), it is owned by the Town and Manor of Hungerford, an ancient organisation of trustees. Freeman’s (or Freeman’s) Marsh probably came into existence during the late medieval period and was established on an area of low-lying marshy meadow land around the Old Mill Stream, part of the River Dun. The majority of the zone is covered by thick layers of alluvium and alluvial soils. The Kennet and Avon canal was cut through the zone at the end of the 18th century and, shortly after this, the size of the common was extended. A piece of farmland on the lower valley slope south of the canal was added to Freeman’s Marsh when Hungerford Parish was enclosed by Act of Parliament in the 1820s. This area was not a low-lying meadow and still has a different, drier and less meadow-like, grass coverage. The southern part of the zone was bisected by the main line of the railway from London to the West Country in the mid 19th century.

Historic Environment

HER records are fairly dense in this zone and most relate to medieval/post-medieval land-use, 18th/19th century transport features and Second World War structures. Most records are of earthworks or extant structures. No material or features dating prior to the medieval period have been found in this zone. This may be because the land-cover and lack of ploughing has prevented recognition of any prehistoric and Romano-British features that may be present. Activity of these periods is documented in neighbouring zones and it is possible that features of this date may exist in the zone.

Hungerford’s commons were the subject of an aerial survey and analysis project by English Heritage in 2005. This work mapped lynchets and areas of gravel extraction of probable late medieval or post-medieval date. The lynchets are in the part of the common added in the 1820s and have been interpreted as cultivation features, perhaps headlands of medieval open field farming.

There are no listed buildings in this zone, but standing structures are an important component of the HER. Two locks and a swing bridge on this stretch of the canal are recorded by the HER. The Kennet and Avon canal was part of a major Second World War stop line and a pillbox from this system formerly existed at Cobbler’s Lock.

The zone was recorded as part of Hungerford’s medieval fishery and evidence of fish-weirs and other features relating to river exploitation may survive within the present stream channel and its banks. Deposits relating to this activity from earlier and later periods may be present and could range in date from prehistoric to post-medieval. Such features may be well-preserved through waterlogging and are likely to be significant as exploitation of riverine resources is poorly understood.

Historic Environment Potential

Freeman’s Marsh is significant as a unique survival of a land-use formerly present in most river valleys in the district and in addition its archaeological potential is likely to be high. It is possible that the zone may contain prehistoric and Romano-British features, but the nature and quality of any below-ground deposits is unclear. The zone also contains significant earthworks. If they are of medieval and post-medieval date they have the potential to assist in understanding the

Historic Environment Character Zone

landscape and economy of that supported Hungerford. If the earthworks are earlier in date they could be significant in understanding the pre-medieval land-use of the vicinity. Features related to river exploitation, particularly of medieval date, may also exist.

Historic Environment Action Plan

Conservation Issues

- This is the only area of common meadow surviving in the district and deserves careful management.
- The management of the earthwork features is a key objective.

Research Potential

- What function and date are the surviving earthwork features?
- Does evidence for riverine activities survive in this zone?
- Although the pillbox is reported as having been demolished, are there other defensive features related to the GHQ stop line in the zone?