

HCPD Hungerford Common – Port Down

Historic Character

This is a zone of common grazing land on the east side of Hungerford that is crossed by roads from the town to Kintbury and Inkpen. Like Freeman's Marsh on the west of the town (HECZ *HCFM*), it is owned by the Town and Manor of Hungerford, an ancient organisation of trustees. The routes across Port Down are lined by avenues of ornamental trees that were planted at the end of the 19th century. The development of the common is not clearly understood but it is possible that it was established during the late 12th century when the town of Hungerford was laid out. It is known, from references in early 16th century documents, to have been in existence by the end of the medieval period. Port Down was extended when the parish was enclosed by Act of Parliament in the 1820s and a field between the common's northern edge and the canal was added. The main railway line from London to the West Country cut through Port Down in the mid 19th century and it now exists as two areas of common land. A further increase in the common's extent took place in the 1980s when a field was added to its south-western corner.

Historic Environment

HER records are fairly dense for this zone. The common itself is recorded as a monument, but most records relate to earthworks or extant structures. Hungerford's commons were the subject of an aerial survey and analysis project by English Heritage in 2005. This work greatly increased our knowledge of features in the zone. The earliest features identified are earthworks of a field system, thought to be of a later prehistoric/Romano-British date, in the centre of the common. The majority of the other earthworks are possibly medieval and post-medieval in date, relating to the use of the zone as a common. A series of linear earthworks exist across the centre of the zone and are considered to derive from ploughing, carried out to improve the quality of grazing. Several hollows exist around the periphery of the common and are thought to relate to commoners exercising rights of quarrying. Earthworks of tree enclosure rings were also recorded by the English Heritage project, interpreted as part of the late 19th century phase of ornamental tree planting that also created the avenues. The English Heritage project also mapped a series of terraces in the part of the common added in the 1820s. The function of these features is unclear; they may be agricultural or could represent medieval speculative town plots that were not subsequently developed.

There is a single listed building at the edge of this zone, the Dun Mill Lock canal bridge, but other standing structures are an important component of the HER. The Kennet and Avon canal was part of a major Second World War stop line and two pillboxes from this system exist near Dun Mill Lock. These structures were an important element of this system, but are now falling into disrepair.

Historic Environment Potential

Hungerford Port Down is a significant survival of a type of land-use formerly much more widespread across the district, and in addition it may have a high archaeological potential. The zone contains surviving earthworks of a probable later prehistoric/Romano-British field system and it is likely that sub-surface deposits of these periods exist. The degree of preservation of such deposits is unclear as the common was subject to both medieval and post-medieval ploughing and landscaping which may have truncated any deposits. Medieval and post-medieval earthworks could be significant in understanding the landscape and economy that supported Hungerford and the development of the town.

Historic Environment Character Zone

Historic Environment Action Plan

Conservation Issues

- This is the one of the most significant areas of Common land in the district and deserves careful management.
- The management of the earthwork features is a key objective.
- Conservation and interpretation of the WWII pillboxes is a key priority.

Research Potential

- What function and date are the surviving earthwork features?
- What date is the early phase of field system identified?
- What is the date and function of the terraces identified?
- Is there evidence of the function of the Common in relation to the adjacent planned town in the archaeological or historical record?
- Are there other defensive features related to the GHQ stop line in the zone?