

Historic Environment Character Zone

KVFW Kennet Valley Floor West

Historic Character

The western part of the Kennet floodplain from Newbury to just west of Hungerford, this zone was historically covered by meadow land and marshy areas which were used as common grazing and shared amongst the settlements along the valley floor. The area from Kintbury to the Wiltshire border had been converted into water meadows by the 18th century. The rest of the zone was a mix of water meadows and fields created at the start of the 19th century by Parliamentary enclosure of common meadows. The zone as a whole contained the largest expanse of water meadows in the district. Several different layouts of water meadow were found but it is not clear whether these reflect the date of water meadow creation or operational differences. Settlement was largely absent from the floodplain and the Denford mills and Benham Farm were the only occupation in the zone. Small, scattered scrubby woods existed on some areas of marshy ground by the late 19th century. The canal and the railway were constructed through the zone in the late 18th and early 19th century. They took very similar lines between Kintbury and Hungerford which created a wide transport corridor between the two settlements.

The floodplain remains a rural area but has experienced considerable change since the latter half of the 20th century. Decline and disuse of the water meadow system has led to change of use in all former water meadows. Large areas are now in use as pasture and the earthworks of the channel systems survive within the new fields. Significant areas of water meadow have scrubbed over and now form substantial secondary woodlands. Most Parliamentary enclosures have been altered; many still function as fields, but some have been used for tree plantations and have created wooded areas around Marsh Benham. The increase in tree cover has led parts of the floodplain to develop a wooded character previously absent from the zone. This is most evident between Marsh Benham and Hungerford. Settlement has remained sparse on the floodplain. Large areas of water meadow and Parliamentary fields at the eastern end of the zone were taken into the parkland of Benham Valence at the start of the 20th century and are now part of its registered parkland.

Historic Environment

HER records are dense in this zone and some activity for all periods is represented on the floodplain. However, there has been much less archaeological work in this zone than seen in the eastern Kennet floodplain, where large-scale gravel extraction has been carried out. The most informative work has been carried out by amateur archaeologists and this has located significant evidence for Mesolithic occupation. Most evidence for this zone comes from finds, extant historic structures and documentary references. Earthworks and cropmarks, though common on adjacent valley sides, are rare on the floodplain. It is likely that cropmarks have not developed due to alluvium masking archaeological features.

Prehistoric material has been recovered from numerous locations and includes significant Palaeolithic and Mesolithic material. A Palaeolithic flint-working site, Avington VI, was located within layers of alluvium following electricity works near Kintbury. This site is important as in-situ remains of this period are rare and it is also the only site of this period in the district. Mesolithic finds have been recovered from several locations and twenty-nine probable occupation sites have been located by fieldwalking. The greatest concentrations of these are between Avington and Hamstead Marshall. It is unclear whether this reflects the extent of fieldwork or a true pattern of Mesolithic occupation. The Kennet has the highest concentration of Mesolithic activity

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in the District and these sites are a major component of this pattern. The potential for discovery of further Mesolithic sites on the floodplain is high.

Material of subsequent periods is much more scattered. Some Neolithic and Bronze Age activity has been located in the zone and comes mainly from burials and probable funerary monuments. Finds of human skulls associated with deer bones were made at Benham Marsh/ Halfway in the 19th century and have been attributed to a Neolithic date. These may indicate a ritual use of the floodplain during this period. Later Prehistoric and Romano-British evidence is almost entirely lacking in the zone. Settlement has been found on the floodplains of other river systems, such as the Thames, and it is possible that such sites exist in this zone but are masked by alluvium and have not yet been discovered.

Evidence for later periods is fairly scarce and confined to canal features and WWII pillboxes. The canal has been subject to a huge programme of restoration and the cut and locks incorporate new material but its bridges have seen less alteration. Eleven of the locks and bridges have been designated as listed buildings. The Kennet and Avon canal was part of a major WWII stop line and this section of the floodplain contains a large number of pillboxes, five of which are listed buildings. These pillboxes were an important component of the system but are falling into disrepair through redundancy and disuse. The only other listed building is a pavilion at Leverton belonging to the nearby parkland at Chilton Lodge.

Two former mills exist at Denford, retaining historic structures. Mills have stood at both sites since the early 19th century but little else is known of their history. It is thought that many mills along the Kennet are of medieval (perhaps early medieval) origin and this could be true of these mills. Significant below-ground archaeological deposits and standing structural remains may exist at both mill sites. Part of the Conservation Area at Hamstead Lock falls into this zone, as do the Conservation Areas of Benham Park and Kintbury. It is also possible that some action associated with the First Battle of Newbury occurred in the Kennet Valley Floor West zone; part of the Registered Battlefield comes into the southeast corner, though most lies within the adjacent HECZ NB1.

Evidence of former river channels may exist within the floodplain. Deposits related to river exploitation, such as wharves, fish-weirs and mills, may survive within former river channels or the present active channels and their banks. Such deposits could range in date from Prehistoric to post-medieval and may be well-preserved through waterlogging; however, it is also possible that they may have been truncated by water meadow construction. Remains of these features will be significant as exploitation of riverine resources is poorly understood.

Historic Environment Potential

The potential for significant buried archaeological deposits is high across the zone. These deposits are most likely to be of Prehistoric, particularly Mesolithic, date. Former river channels and associated features are likely to be located on the floodplain. Elements of features such as wharves and fish-weirs are likely to be preserved within the present river channels. There is a significant stock of pillboxes that remain poorly understood and recorded. Significant below-ground deposits and structural remains may exist at mill sites.

Historic Environment Action Plan

Conservation Issues

- Intensive modern agriculture threatens the resource on buried archaeological sites.
- Possible gravel extraction from valley floor.
- More detail is needed on the historic building stock to ensure appropriate policies are put in place to conserve this resource.
- Conservation Area appraisal and management plan required.
- Development pressure.
- Management of Kennet and Avon canal and possible impacts on surviving early fabric of locks, bridges, etc.
- Management of registered battlefield site.
- Management of WWII features.

Research Priorities

- Can the palaeo-environmental potential of the area be characterised and exploited?
- Where are we likely to find further Mesolithic sites? Is it possible to map the landscape to produce a predictive model for the Mesolithic?
- Does the general spread of prehistoric material across the zone represent settlement activity? Where are prehistoric settlements most likely to occur?
- What does the paucity of medieval evidence in the area tell us about land use and socio-economic activity in the zone at this time?
- What are the origins of the farmsteads in the zone?
- Does archaeological evidence for the historic management of the river survive, especially in relation to mills and water management?
- Do the historic buildings in the zone contain any information about post-medieval and modern changes to land use and agricultural systems?
- What are the origins of the water meadow system? Can their evolution be traced in the archaeological record?
- What evidence survives on the site of the 1st Battle of Newbury? Can the archaeological and landscape value of the battlefield be quantified?
- Does archaeological evidence for the early development of the Kennet and Avon Canal survive in locks and other canal infrastructure?
- Can the surviving WWII defensive features in the Kennet valley help us understand the military and political history of that period?