

Historic Environment Character Zone

LVF Lambourn Valley Floor

Historic Character

This long narrow zone occupies the valley floor between Lambourn and the confluence with the Winterbourne and contains most of the historic settlements in the upper and middle Lambourn Valley. Almost all settlements are villages and hamlets of medieval or earlier origin and are sited on the valley floor at fairly regular intervals. Each settlement contains a historic farm and in the larger villages (Eastbury, East Garston, Great Shefford, Boxford) there are two or three. Historically, the remainder of the valley floor was covered by meadow land, which was a common grazing resource shared between the settlements. Most meadows had been enclosed by the 18th century; some were simply enclosed into pasture fields, but the majority became water meadows. These covered the valley floor between East Garston and Bagnor and formed the district's most significant concentration of water-meadows outside the Kennet Valley. The small remaining areas of meadow were enclosed into fields by act of Parliament early in the 19th century. Welford Park is the only park lying within the zone; it originated as a deer park in the mid 16th century if not earlier.

Significant alteration has occurred in this zone since the mid 20th century. Active management of water meadows ceased in the earlier 20th century and most have now become either arable or pasture fields. Significant areas of water meadow at Welford have become wooded, either through active plantation or re-colonisation, and this has introduced a wooded element to the valley floor that did not previously exist. Settlement growth has been modest and has centred on East Garston, West Shefford, and Boxford. Development has consisted of infill or growth around existing settlements and little redevelopment has occurred in the historic cores. Most housing was built in the late 20th century, but a small amount of growth took place at East Garston in the late 19th century.

Historic Environment

There are many HER records in this zone, predominantly built structures and records of medieval and later settlement concentrated in the historic cores. The zone was covered by both the Berkshire Downs Survey and National Mapping Programme, but neither yielded much information. The land in this zone is unfavourable to cropmark production, being an alluvial area used mainly for pasture, and because arable land is limited there is therefore little scope for fieldwalking. The references to artefact finds are mostly from 19th or early 20th century discoveries, and although numerous, are often only generally located within parishes or settlements. Other archaeological work is limited to a few excavations by local archaeologists and work carried out prior to development.

Prehistoric activity is not well-documented and most records are of chance finds. Some Mesolithic activity is evident from finds of this period at Elton Farm, East Shefford and Great Shefford, but it is unclear whether any of this material is indicative of the existence of settlements of this period. Neolithic material has been found only at Great Shefford and during fieldwalking at Maidencourt Farm and the nature of activity in this zone during this period is unclear. Later prehistoric material is also scarce; only Bronze Age finds and some flintwork from Maidencourt, an urn from Boxford churchyard and a single Iron Age find has been recorded. There is significant cropmark evidence of later prehistoric settlement and farming on the valley sides and it is likely that the river and valley floor were heavily exploited. Features of these periods probably exist but have not been recognised due to a lack of both cropmark development and opportunities for chance finds.

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Romano-British activity is documented only by finds, mostly of which are coins. Finds of this date have been recovered from Bagnor, Boxford, East Garston and Eastbury. Again, this zone was probably intensively used, as significant cropmark evidence of Romano-British activity exists on the valley sides. Features of this date are likely to exist but have probably not been recognised due to a lack of both cropmark development and opportunity to discover chance finds.

There is evidence for early medieval settlement at several locations. Boxford and Welford were both referred to in 10th century documents, and Bagnor was mentioned as having a mill in Domesday. A settlement at Shefford was also mentioned in Domesday, but whether this refers to East Shefford and/or Great Shefford is unclear as the earliest reference to separate settlements was not until the 13th century. Apart from 11th century elements in Boxford church, little is known of the nature or extent of each settlement during this period as no deposits of this date have been discovered. A pre-8th century inhumation cemetery was found and partially excavated at East Shefford during the railway construction, but it is unclear if there was a contemporary settlement near this location. A further, possibly isolated burial was also found during railway works between East Garston and Eastbury.

Most historic settlements had developed by the end of the late medieval period; evidence of settlement at Elton Farm and Woodspeen is lacking, but it is probable that these also developed in this period. The churches at East Garston, East Shefford, Great Shefford, Welford and Boxford all retain significant medieval elements despite Victorian alteration. Great Shefford and Welford churches are also notable for their unusual towers. The earliest other buildings are a 14th century house at East Garston and a 15th century house at Great Shefford, but most surviving buildings are 16th century. Buildings of this date exist at Boxford, Westbrook, Easton, Great Shefford and East Garston. Evidence of desertion or shrinkage exists at several settlements: East Shefford, Maidencourt, Bockhampton and Boxford. East Shefford was formerly a larger settlement and Hug Ditch Court, an unoccupied moated site and scheduled ancient monument, lies in the centre of the hamlet. Maidencourt had contracted to a farm by the 18th century but no medieval features have been recorded at the site. Bockhampton had also shrunk to a farm by this date but settlement earthworks and a 17th century manor house remain. The earthworks are a Scheduled Monument and include building platforms, hollow ways, field boundaries and a chapel site. Earthworks south of Boxford indicate that some contraction of this village has occurred. There is documentary evidence for a monastery at Welford Park, but no apparent physical remains of it.

Post-medieval records are of buildings, industrial structures and transport features. Much of the building stock at each settlement dates from this period, including a Victorian church at Eastbury. Watermills existed at most historic settlements and the majority of remaining mill buildings date from this period. It is possible that these are on the site of medieval mills. A forge building, converted to housing, survives at East Garston. The Lambourn Valley Railway was constructed through the zone in the 1890s. It was closed in 1973 and most elements of it, including stations, were removed but the line of the railway is largely preserved as a wooded earthwork. There are over 130 listed buildings in this zone and most are 16th to 18th century domestic structures and farm buildings. Other listed structures include the six churches, buildings at Welford Park, three mills and a forge. Conservation Areas have been designated at Bagnor, Boxford, Westbrook, Great Shefford (a small area around the manor house and church), East Garston and Eastbury.

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Historic Environment Potential

The potential for archaeological deposits of Romano-British and earlier date is hard to assess as limited material of these dates has been recovered. The adjacent valley sides were heavily-utilised and it is probable that the valley floor was also exploited during these periods. Deposits relating to this exploitation may exist, but it is not possible to be more specific about their quality and location. Deposits of occupation from the early medieval onwards are likely in historic settlement nuclei, and any such deposits could be crucial to understanding the development of settlement in this zone. Several deserted or shrunken medieval village sites exist and any deposits at these could be valuable as desertion is a poorly understood phenomenon in the district. The historic building stock seems well-studied but it is possible that further significant buildings or structural elements may be identified.

Historic Environment Action Plan

Conservation Issues

- Development pressure is forcing settlement to expand, threatening their historic character.
- Conservation Area appraisals and management plans are overdue.
- More detail is needed on the historic building stock to ensure appropriate policies are put in place to conserve this resource.
- Earthwork sites representing settlement desertion, shrinkage and shift need careful management.
- Management of water meadow systems.

Research Priorities

- Does the Mesolithic material demonstrate evidence of population utilising the river valleys to move away from the core zone of activity in the Kennet Valley?
- Is the absence of Prehistoric and Romano-British material from this zone an accurate reflection of settlement patterns and landscape utilisation in these periods?
- What is the nature of the early Saxon activity at East Shefford? How does this relate to recent settlement finds near Lambourn?
- What were the origins of the settlements at Bockhampton and Maidencourt Farm and why did they not survive?
- What information do the shrunken/deserted settlements contain for understanding how medieval population utilised the landscape?
- Can evidence for settlement evolution in the Lambourn valley be found without the existing settlements?
- What kind of a monastic institution existed at Welford and what evidence of it survives?
- Do the historic buildings in the zone contain any information about post-medieval and modern changes to land use and agricultural systems?
- Can the physical remains of the Lambourn Valley branch line help us understand late 19th century railway engineering?