

BCA Bucklebury Common Area

Historic Character

This is a densely wooded zone on the Pang watershed that is dominated by Bucklebury Common. Several areas of ancient woodland, fields and historic and recent settlement also exist in the zone.

Bucklebury Common was probably established from an area of heathland in the early medieval period. Small irregularly-shaped fields and assarts existed on the northern and eastern fringe of the Common. Most were medieval and early post-medieval intakes of land for farming from the Common and this is particularly visible at Scotland. Historically, the Common was a focus for settlement and numerous common-edge settlements developed around its fringe. The largest of these was Chapel Row, but most had no formal name. These settlements began as squatter occupation by those wishing to exploit the common's resources and are an important but poorly understood component of the district's historic settlement pattern.

There has been significant change to the land-use and settlement in the zone over the 20th century. The most significant change is at Bucklebury Common itself. The Common has become largely wooded-over, through a mixture of woodland regeneration due to a lack of grazing and some tree plantation. This has led to what was previously a very open zone with views into the Kennet and Pang valleys and to the downs, becoming very visually enclosed. Almost all of the historic fields on the fringe of the Common have been rationalised into fields better suited to modern mechanised agriculture or turned into paddocks. These changes have created a much more regular landscape and contributed to erosion of the zone's historic character. There has been significant housing growth across the zone since the later 20th century. Chapel Row has been a focus of growth and is now about four times its historic size. Recent housing at Chapel Row is typified by small estates and developments of a few large houses. A new settlement called Upper Bucklebury, consisting of several small housing estates, has been created on the southern edge of the Common. This was a generally unsettled part of the zone prior to construction of the housing estates. In addition to housing growth, the historic settlements have been gentrified with renovation of old cottages and houses and some replaced with large new family homes. This has altered what would have been fairly poor, disorganised, squatter settlements into enclaves of affluent housing.

Historic Environment

There are very few HER records and these are scattered across the zone, with no significant concentrations. The zone was covered by the Berkshire Downs Survey and the Lower Kennet Valley Survey and no other meaningful recorded archaeological work has been carried out. The surveys found few features. This is unsurprising since major components of both were fieldwalking and earthwork observation and the land-cover of most of this zone is unsuited to such methods.

No prehistoric material has been recovered from this zone, but it is likely that it was exploited during this period as surrounding areas were settled and used. It is unclear what kind of activity may have taken place in this zone and whether any deposits related to it exist here.

The only Romano-British material from the zone is a find of a single coin from the east end of the Common. Again, the zone is likely to have been used during this period as surrounding areas were settled and exploited, but it is uncertain whether any activity would have left visible traces.

Historic Environment Character Zone

Romano-British pottery manufacturing has been identified at some commons in the district and it is possible that this may have also been carried out at Bucklebury Common.

Early medieval material is also sparse and represented by a single find of an iron ring from the centre of the Common. A chapel existed in the Chapel Row area by the 12th century and it is possible that this may have been early medieval in origin. The site of the chapel is unknown as it was demolished and used for building material in the 18th century. Other late medieval features also exist including fishponds, formerly owned by Reading Abbey, and a rabbit warren near the centre of the Common. A 16th century timber framed building exists at Winchcombe farm. The origin of the zone's settlements is unclear; all were mapped by the 18th century and some, including Chapel Row, have buildings and documentary evidence that date back to the early 17th century.

Post-medieval evidence is solely composed of standing buildings. There are 26 listed buildings and they are well-distributed across the zone. The majority are 17th century domestic or farm buildings, but significant 16th and 20th century buildings are also present. There is an extensive stock of unlisted historic buildings in the zone. Many buildings have been subject to renovation in recent years but most have no formal recognition or protection as none of the historic settlements have been designated as Conservation Areas. It is possible that significant buildings and structures may have already been removed or compromised.

A small military storage area and camp was established near the centre of the Common during the Second World War. Trackways from this phase of use exist, but the extent of the activity, or whether any other related features remain, is unclear.

Historic Environment Potential

The archaeological potential of this zone is extremely hard to assess based on the existing evidence. Archaeological deposits may exist in the zone, but it is impossible to be more specific about their location, nature or quality medieval evidence is unlikely to be represented across most of the zone but it is possible that the historic settlements originated during these periods. Deposits of early occupation may survive within historic settlement nuclei, and any such remains could be crucial to understanding the development of settlement in this zone. The historic building stock is not extensive and, although some structures are listed, further significant structures may be identified. It is also possible that further remains of 20th century military activity exist.

Historic Environment Action Plan

Conservation Issues

- There is continued development pressure in the zone; much of it is unsympathetic in scale and design. This could lead to further erosion of the historic character.
- Management of the Common for nature conservation could present opportunities to restore some of the historic character.
- Ancient woodland has not been well managed in recent years and this poses a threat to its survival.
- Historic building stock is poorly understood and little protection is currently afforded to this resource.

Historic Environment Character Zone

Research Priorities

- What information survives about the formation of the Common and early prehistoric land-use?
- Does evidence for the exploitation of the zone in the later Prehistoric and Roman periods survive on the Common?
- Does evidence survive on the nature and origins of the medieval settlement?
- Does evidence survive for the medieval chapel at Chapel Row?
- What are the dates, function and significance of the historic buildings in the zone?
- What is the extent and survival of the remains of the WWII use of the Common?