

SCA Snelsmore Commons Area

Historic Character

This zone is bisected by the A34 and characterised by large areas of common land, woods and recent fields. It lies around the head of a dry valley running from the downs at Chieveley to the River Lambourn at Donnington. The medieval landscape was dominated by ancient woodlands and large areas of common land. Farms and small settlements set in areas of fields nestled amongst wooded and common land. The large commons, Snelsmore Common and Snelsmore East Common, remain as common land today. Most fields were irregularly-shaped early enclosures; however, a block of regularly-shaped fields existed between Snelsmore Common and Bussock. Extensive coppiced ancient woodlands ran along the crest of the ridges and existed around the fringes of the commons. A dense network of roads and tracks ran through the zone and the interplay of these routes, landuse and topography created a very irregular, sinuous grain to the landscape.

This zone has seen substantial alteration in the late 20th century. Most historic enclosures have been rationalised into fields better suited to modern mechanised agriculture through boundary removal and reorganisation. This process was further accelerated by the construction of the A34. The central part of the zone now generally lacks hedges and has a very open character. Large areas of paddocks have also been created. These changes have created a much more regular landscape and have significantly altered the historic character of the zone. There has been some change in tree-cover and blocks of ancient woodland at Bussock have been used for housing or cleared of native tree cover and replanted with other species. A lack of grazing on the commons has led to them becoming substantially wooded-over. This is now being tackled by management and conservation work at Snelsmore Common.

Historic Environment

HER records are dominated by findspots and earthworks, and are unevenly distributed across the zone. Most records come from the west of the zone and almost none exist in the east. The zone is well covered by survey work, both the Berkshire Downs and Lower Kennet Valley surveys covered parts of the zone with the whole being covered by the National Mapping Programme. Apart from assessment and monitoring of construction for the A34 Newbury Bypass and the improvement works at the M4 - A34 - A339 junctions, little other archaeological work has been carried out.

Very limited evidence of prehistoric activity has been recovered from the zone as a whole. An area of late Neolithic/early Bronze Age activity was identified from a flint scatter found during fieldwalking prior to road construction near Mary Hare School. The area was excavated and a hearth and other features were located. The only other definite evidence of prehistoric activity is the Iron Age hillfort at Bussock Camp. The hillfort survives as substantial wooded earthworks within Bussock Wood and is the only scheduled ancient monument in the zone. Little is known about the nature of the fort and there has been no known excavation at the site. Two convergent linear earthworks, one known as the Black Ditch, run across the centre of Snelsmore Common. These are undated and have been subject to several interpretations, including that of later prehistoric boundary features.

No Romano-British material has been recorded from the zone.

Medieval features are uncommon in this zone but it is thought that the commons came into existence during this period. The linear earthworks on Snelsmore Common have also been

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interpreted as early medieval boundary features and are superficially similar to Bury's Bank on Greenham Common. An earthwork enclosure, Cinges Haga, was mentioned in a charter of 951 and is thought to have run across Snelsmore East Common. The precise location or whether there are any above or below-ground remains of Cinges Haga is unknown. Late medieval material is mainly represented by features related to the use of Snelsmore Common. An earthwork bank, thought to be late medieval in date, can be traced forming the boundary of Snelsmore Common at several places on its western side. A medieval pillow mound also exists as an earthwork at the common's northern tip. A deer park, known from documentary references of 1509, is thought to have existed near Snelsmore Common and it has been suggested that the common boundary bank may have formed the pale of this park. It is thought that the settlements in this zone may have originated during the late medieval period but no physical remains of this date have yet been found at any of the historic settlements.

Post-medieval records are fairly scarce in the zone and largely composed of standing buildings. The historic building stock of the zone is not extensive, but includes four listed buildings. Three are late 17th to early 19th century farm buildings and the other is an early 20th century country house, Phillip's Hill House. Arlington Manor is not listed, but is recorded as a building of interest on the HER.

Snelsmore Common was requisitioned for military use during WWII. Several concrete roads constructed during this phase of use remain on the common.

Historic Environment Potential

Areas of archaeological potential exist at Bussock Camp, Snelsmore Common and Snelsmore East Common. Limited evidence of late-Neolithic to Iron Age activity exists in the zone and below-ground deposits of these dates may exist, it is not possible, however, to be more specific about the location, nature and quality of any remains. Medieval evidence is not likely across most of the zone, but it is possible that the historic settlements may have 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 possible that further remains of 20th century military activity exist on Snelsmore Common.

Historic Environment Action Plan

Conservation Issues

- Potential spread of Newbury and related urban and suburban features into the zone.
- Management of woodlands, conservation of surviving ancient woodlands and replacement of plantations with more mixed tree coverage.
- Management of archaeological sites on the commons, especially with pressure on them as leisure facilities.
- Historic building stock is poorly understood and little protection is currently afforded to this resource.

Research Priorities

- Do unrecorded archaeological sites/features survive within the wooded areas?
- What evidence survives of early prehistoric exploitation of this landscape?
- What is the date and function of Bussock Camp?

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- What was the nature of the later prehistoric land-use context around Bussock Camp?
- What are the origins and nature of the linear features on Snelsmore Common?
- What was the enclosure at Cinges Haga? Does evidence survive for this site?
- What are the dates, function and significance of the historic buildings in the zone?
- Does archaeological evidence related to the military use of Snelsmore Common survive?