

SG Sulham Gap

Historic Character

This is a largely rural zone, bisected by the M4, comprising both low-lying marshy land around the Pang and the Sulham Brook and the slope of the Thames watershed at Reading. Historically, the zone was well-wooded and characterised by early enclosure fields, with much permanent pasture next to the brook, and a dispersed settlement pattern composed of a mix of hamlets and numerous small farms.

Over the course of the latter half of the 20th century there has been significant modification to fieldscapes in the zone. Most historic fields have been reorganised to create holdings more suited to mechanised agriculture. Although many historic boundary features have been lost in this process, the grain of the landscape is largely unaltered. There has been only slight change in the extent of tree cover, but around half of the ancient woods have been cleared of mature trees and replanted with other species. These remain wooded areas, but have lost ancient woodland features. Despite being located next to Reading and the M4, little settlement growth has occurred in the zone.

Historic Environment

HER records exist across the zone but are patchily distributed with the highest density on the valley floor. Most gaps in the HER distribution coincide with areas of historic woodland, but this does not account for the seemingly blank area on the higher ground at the eastern edge of the zone. The Lower Kennet Valley Survey and the National Mapping Programme both covered this zone, but other archaeological work has been limited. Fieldwalking took place at Mosshall Wood and monitoring of the Theale to Bradfield pipeline resulted in a series of small excavations at North Street. Very little study or recording of buildings is documented.

During the last glaciation, the Kennet followed a different course, running through the Sulham Gap and joining the Thames at Pangbourne. Its course altered and ceased to flow through the zone in the early post-glacial period, possibly around 10,000 years ago, coinciding with the late Palaeolithic and earliest Mesolithic. Significant evidence of late Palaeolithic and Mesolithic activity has been found at several locations along the present Kennet and it is possible that this former course was also a focus for human activity. Some evidence of activity during this period has been recovered from the zone and includes Palaeolithic flintwork from the Sadler's Farm site (east of Sulham Wood) and transitional Palaeolithic/Mesolithic flintwork from Nunhide Farm. Although the nature and extent of activity is unclear, deposits of this date are probable as are glacial palaeochannels of the former river. Evidence of Neolithic activity is very limited and comes from finds of flintwork near Boxgrove Wood. The nature of Neolithic activity zone and whether deposits of this date exist is unclear.

Evidence is more widespread from the Bronze Age onwards. A lithic working site of this date was found by fieldwalking at Mosshall Wood and a cremation cemetery of at least seven burials was exposed by gravel extraction east of Sulham Wood. Cropmarks of possible Bronze Age date exist at several locations and finds of this date were recovered from Malpas Shaw, North Street and the Sadler's Farm site. Iron Age activity is represented by cropmarks and excavated features. No finds of this period are recorded. Cropmarks thought to be of later prehistoric/Romano-British field systems and settlement have been mapped east of Sulham Wood and at several locations around North Street. Excavations following pipeline monitoring at North Street found that these features arose from a series of small ditched fields, which were related to pits, post holes and occupation material. Activity spanned the early Iron Age to the 4th century AD with the main phase during the 1st century AD. Excavations at the northeast tip of

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the zone near Purley in the 1960s found Iron Age and later ditches. Some of this zone, therefore, was part of a settled and farmed landscape during this period.

The settled and farmed character of parts of the zone seems to continue into the Romano-British period. In addition to the cropmarks and excavated evidence mentioned above, a possible villa has been recorded from cropmarks immediately west of North Street and a kiln site may exist near Pincent's Farm. Finds of artefacts are limited to a coin from Tidmarsh. It is thought that the line of the Roman road between Silchester and Dorchester ran through the Sulham Gap, but no physical remains of it have yet been found.

Early medieval records are confined to a single reference to Sulham in Domesday in which it is described as having a church. It is thought that the present, Victorian, church stands on the site of the earlier church. If this is the case, the early medieval settlement is likely to have been around this location. The nature of this settlement is unclear and no physical remains of this period are yet known.

Late medieval records are not extensive and are confined to the settlement at Sulham, some buildings and excavated material. Sulham seems to have grown into a small hamlet during this period but, again, no deposits or buildings of this date are yet known. Significant occupation deposits were excavated prior to pipeline construction south of North Street. Two concentrations of features dating to the 12th and 13th centuries were found by the road between North Street and Theale and have been interpreted as a hamlet. Three 16th century farmhouses, Home Farm (Purley Park), Sulham Farm and Hallplace Farm, and one 16th century barn are recorded in the area.

Post-medieval records are not common and are represented by a landscape park, standing buildings and the turnpike road between Theale and Pangbourne and its milestones. Purley Park is an early 18th century formal landscape park and is a registered park; many of its buildings are also listed. The central house is earlier in date, c 1609, and the park also contains a temple commemorating the battle of Culloden. North Street and the other farms in the zone were all in existence by the 18th century, but little is known of their development and origin. One of these historic farms has been demolished: Sadler's Farm, east of Sulham Wood. Its site has become wooded over, but its ponds remain as water-filled earthworks.

A significant WWII stop-line, GHQ Line Red, ran through the zone linking the Kennet and Thames defences. It comprised a dense string of pillboxes and anti-tank structures and at least 18 pillboxes and other features remain. Most are not in any active use and are falling into decay and disrepair.

There are nearly 30 listed buildings in the zone; most are in Sulham or at Purley Park. Unlike other areas, farm buildings are well-recognised here, and farmhouses and barns dating from the 16th to 18th centuries form a major component of the listed structures. The other major component is 17th century cottages, all of which are in Sulham. Clusters of listed structures exist at Nunhide Farm (farmhouse and dovecote) and Purley Park (house, lodges, temple). The other listed structures include the 1830s Victorian gothic church in Sulham, an 18th century forge and two milestones. Sulham School, dating to the 1890s, is not listed but was mentioned by Pevsner.

Historic Environment Potential

Although HER records are patchy and excavation and other work has been limited, the archaeological potential of the zone is high. Significant deposits that could assist the

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understanding of the zone's environmental development are likely. The nature of soils means that extensive organic preservation is unlikely and most evidence will probably be from glacial palaeochannels and sediments. By analogy with the Kennet valley floor, late Palaeolithic and Mesolithic deposits are also likely. Such features are likely to be below thick layers of alluvium and may be well-preserved. Later prehistoric and Romano-British features are probable over much of the zone but the nature and quality of any deposits is hard to estimate. On higher ground, features are likely to be less well-preserved due to truncation by ploughing; those on the valley floor may be more intact due to the existence of permanent pasture. Early and late medieval deposits are probable in Sulham. Little is known of the origin of the other settlements; it is possible that they came into existence in the late medieval period. Any deposits or structural remains relating to early occupation from any settlement will be significant in understanding the development of settlement in this area.

Historic Environment Action Plan

Conservation Issues

- There is continued development pressure in the area. This could result in a loss of character.
- Very high archaeological potential in the zone, especially for the prehistoric period.
- Historic building stock is poorly understood and little protection is currently afforded to this resource.
- Management of surviving WWII stop line features.
- Potential impact of gravel/minerals extraction.

Research Priorities

- Can Palaeolithic sites be identified? Do sites with in-situ deposits exist in this zone?
- Does a transitional Palaeolithic – Mesolithic site exist at Nunhide Farm?
- Can the changing course of the River Kennet be traced and dated? Can this provide an indication of the possible location of early prehistoric activity?
- What is the character of the Bronze Age and Iron Age activity in the area?
- Are the Bronze Age cremations at Sadler's Farm an indication of a larger funerary monument complex?
- Can the origins and character of the medieval settlements in the area be found in Sulham and North Street?
- What are the date, function and significance of the historic buildings in the area?
- Can archaeological study of the WWII stop line features advance our understanding of military strategy?