

THC Thatcham Historic Core

Historic Character

A small historic town, Thatcham is known to have been a focus of settlement from the late Saxon period onwards. Thatcham as it is today had its roots in the medieval period and the layout of its centre, with a wide market place, Broadway, surrounded by distinctive narrow burgage plots, was probably established in the later 13th century when the town is recorded as a borough. It is thought that this was an attempt by the Lord of the Manor to establish Thatcham as a rival market centre to Newbury. Thatcham failed to eclipse Newbury and experienced only slight growth until the latter half of the 20th century. The zone of the settlement expanded very slightly from its planned nucleus onto the Bath Road over the 16th and 17th centuries with the Chapel of St Thomas (Bluecoat School) marking the eastern limit.

The huge recent expansion of Thatcham into the surrounding TSA HECZ has led to much re-development within the historic core, as new shopping and business needs are accommodated. The main effect of this has been the loss of distinctive historic features such as historic buildings and the burgage plot pattern. The focus of commercial activity has been subject to a number of shifts. Initially this was from Broadway to the Bath Road, reflecting the importance of passing road trade, but it has now shifted back to Broadway following the construction of a small relief-road. The cumulative effect of changes to Thatcham is that the zone has a very fragmented character and doesn't feel particularly historic despite its long history.

Historic Environment

There has been no major archaeological or historic character study of the town since the Astill survey of 1978. This remains the most comprehensive review of the archaeological potential.

There is little evidence of activity in the zone until the early medieval times. No prehistoric finds or features have been discovered, and only a handful of Roman finds have been made; this contrasts strongly with the TSA HECZ where there is a great deal of Roman evidence. The projected course of Ermin Street could pass through the zone in the vicinity of St Mary's Church. Evidence for Saxon Thatcham is patchy; documentary sources show the existence of a Minster Church and a royal estate in the zone, but the nature and extent of settlement is unclear. However, recent excavations have confirmed that there was a settlement in this period around the zone of St Mary's Church, potentially one of high status. It is thought that the predominantly 13th century St Mary's is the likely location of the Saxon Minster. Evidence for later periods is dominated by the above-ground remains of buildings with some civic features (market cross, milestone) and excavated features also present.

There are a number of listed buildings in the zone, mostly 18-19th century inns and domestic buildings, although the 'Bluecoats' School (originally a medieval chapel), parish church and the barn adjacent to the A4 are included on the list. The area around the church and the Broadway has been designated as a Conservation Area.

Historic Environment Potential

The existing archaeological record for Thatcham is poor. This is probably the result of the limited scope for discovery, or lack of detailed archaeological investigation in the 1960s to 1980s. The zone has been occupied by buildings for several centuries, with re-development starting only recently, and there has also been limited archaeological work carried out. The archaeological potential should be high across much of the zone. Much of the re-development behind the street frontage has consisted of construction of low-rise buildings and clearance of older structures to create car-parking which should mean that some deposits are still present. It is likely that severe

Historic Environment Character Zone

truncation of deposits has occurred at the Waitrose site and along the immediate street frontage due to cellaring.

Historic Environment Action Plan

Conservation Issues

- Conservation Area appraisal and management plan is overdue.
- Redevelopment of the small number of 'Brownfield' sites in the town centre presents an opportunity for archaeological research, but a threat to the character of the settlement.
- The historic building stock is poorly understood and could therefore be threatened by inappropriate alterations/development.
- Need to stimulate greater interest in the history and historic environment potential within the community.
- More information about the form and character of the town is required to inform future development proposals. Need to undertake a new archaeological/historic character study.

Research Potential

- Can the line of the Roman road be established? Is there any Romano-British settlement activity in the zone?
- What was the date, location and status of the first early medieval (Saxon) settlement?
- Where was the location of the early medieval settlement? Can its character be established? Does the discovery of Ipswich ware pottery provide an indication of the status of the site?
- How and when did the later medieval settlement expand away from the area around the church? When was the Broadway laid out? What was the status of the later medieval settlement? Why did the town not succeed in the medieval period?
- What is the date and significance of the historic building stock in the town?