

VSW Valleys South West

Topography, Geology and Soils

This area is composed of a series of valleys of Kennet tributaries and the watershed plateaux between them. The area has a markedly different geology to the surrounding chalk HECAs and chalk deposits outcrop only at its edges. The majority of the area is composed of Reading Beds and overlain by London Clays. Some of the higher watershed ridges are capped by Bagshot Beds with localised deposits of plateau gravels. The majority of the area has clay stagnogley soils with areas of stony sandy podzols and brown sands in the north-western corner. Areas of loamy argyillic brown earths exist at the northern edge with small areas of fine silty rendzinas and loamy palaeo-argyillic brown earths at the southern edge of the area.

Historic Landscape

There are no conclusive traces of an open field system in the area and the medieval landscape seems to have been characterised by small fields interspersed with commons and woods. A dense network of roads and tracks ran through the area and these were heavily influenced by the axes of the valleys within the area. The interplay of topography, roads, fields and woods gave a very irregular grain to the landscape.

Most fields were small and irregularly-shaped suggesting that their enclosure was undertaken in a piecemeal manner by numerous farmers over a long period of time. Several small-medium sized areas of heath, used for common grazing, were found amidst the intimate network of fields and roads; the largest was Inkpen Common. Commons and woods were the only parts of the area that had not been enclosed into fields by the 18th century. Much of the common heath was enclosed by Act of Parliament in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and only a stub of Inkpen Common remained after this process.

This was a more wooded area than adjacent parts of the district and much of it was found as large blocks of woods. About half of the woodland was ancient and it was spread across the area in large, often contiguous, blocks. Other old woodlands were also widespread across the area and existed as small and large blocks. These were sited both adjacent to ancient woods and also as discrete woods, the larger examples creating wooded areas in their own right, such as Curr and Hightree Copses south-east of Kintbury.

Settlement was fairly dense and comprised dispersed settlements, small hamlets and poly-focal settlements. The majority of the dispersed settlements were common-edge settlements, such as Hell Green at Inkpen. These were irregular, unplanned, settlements that had grown-up on the fringes of the common and represent squatter occupation by those wishing to exploit the common's resources. Such settlements were usually "unofficial" and often lacked a formal name. Many took the name of the common that they sat on the edge of, for instance, Crockham Heath. Poly-focal settlements are also a feature of this area and Inkpen and Hamstead Marshall are the best examples. Inkpen was made up of four different settlement nuclei, and Hamstead Marshall of three nuclei strung along the road between Kintbury and Crockham Heath. Farms were also an important component of the settlement pattern and their distribution, size and names are different to that seen in adjacent areas. Farms were generally smaller, more frequent and more widely distributed across the landscape than in neighbouring HECAs. Over

Historic Environment Character Area

half the farms recorded on the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey map of the area have names referring to persons, such as Vanner's Farm, as opposed to place, topographic or other names. This suggests that they were established by numerous individual farmers living on and cultivating their own farms.

Several parklands were found in the area, most being small in size, but one very large park was established at Hamstead Park. The smaller parks were typified by large farmsteads, manor houses and minor gentry's homes set within a few acres of landscaped grounds. Hamstead Park had a long history with its roots in a deer park established by the early 13th century. A mansion and formal gardens were constructed in the 17th century, and later its grounds were enlarged creating an extensive informal park.

Modern Landscape

Agricultural changes have led to reorganisation of fieldscapes to create fields more suited to modern, mechanised farming. Although about half of the historic fields have been modified, large chunks of early enclosures have been left largely unaltered. Parliamentary enclosures do not survive as well and most have been reorganised or have come under different land-uses. A growing number of paddocks have been created in this area. Most have been created on an ad-hoc basis and cluster around settlements, such as at Inkpen. Paddocks are often for hobby/pet ponies and, as they are mostly associated with settlements, they can have the effect of suburbanising areas around villages.

A big increase in tree-cover has occurred despite some clearance of historic woodlands. Large plantations have been created and woodland regeneration and colonisation has led to the development of secondary woodlands. Several plantations were established on Parliamentary fields. This may have been because the fields that were created from heath were too poor to support long-term agriculture. Most plantations are rectilinear and sited next to ancient and old woodlands and fit into the grain of the landscape reasonably well. Some areas of ancient woodland have been cleared to create fields and housing. Much larger blocks of ancient woodland have been cleared of mature tree cover and replanted with other species losing historic features and much of their biodiversity value.

Some parks have barely been altered, such as Kirby House, whilst others have almost totally disappeared. Most parks have seen some degrees of contraction in area occupied and many former parkland areas are now fields and under arable cultivation.

Settlement growth is patchy across the area and varied in character. Some new housing has been constructed at historic settlements and farms whilst building at previously undeveloped locations has created new settlements in the landscape. Most growth has been around Inkpen, where all of its historic settlement nuclei, including those around the former common, have been foci of housing growth. The majority of growth at Inkpen took place between the 1970s and 1990s and is a mix of large family houses and small-scale housing developments; many now have swimming pools and tennis courts. The expansion of Inkpen has linked up its previously distinct historic settlement nuclei and created a sprawling modern settlement. There has also been some growth around West Woodhay and Hamstead Marshall with similarly large homes constructed between their historic nuclei and around their fringes.