

KVV Kennet Valley West

Topography, Geology and Soils

This is the western part of the Kennet Valley from the Wiltshire border to Newbury, including the tributary valleys and watersheds of the Froxfield Stream and the Shalbourne. The northern side of the valley is bisected by several dry valleys including a major valley that runs from Hungerford Newtown to Kintbury. South of the Kennet the valley side is broader and riven by the valleys of several small tributary streams. The geology is mostly chalk with small sections of Reading Beds at the northern and southern edges. There are extensive gravel deposits on the valley floor, the lower part of the northern valley side and also in the bases of the dry valley north of Kintbury and the Froxfield Stream and Shalbourne valleys. Soils are varied across the area. Clayey and flinty palaeo-argyllic brown earths are found on the north side of the valley and around the Froxfield Stream and Kennet & Avon Canal whereas loamy argyllic brown earths are present on the southern valley side. The valley floor has silty humic alluvial gley soils with significant peat deposits. Small areas of clayey stagnogley soils and stony podzols and brown sands are present at the northern and southern edges of the area.

Historic Landscape

This is a mixed area of both nucleated valley floor settlements, surrounded by open fields with riverside meadow grazing, and of smaller settlements and scattered farms, early enclosures and woodland. Open field systems are documented as having operated on the lower slopes of the northern side of the valley and to the south of the river around Hungerford and Kintbury. Extensive meadows existed on the valley floor and were used as common grazing. It is unclear if the open fields spread into parts of the area of less-nucleated settlement or onto the higher valley slopes. Most of the area was enclosed into fields by the 18th century. Some of this land was probably enclosed on a piecemeal basis as implied by the irregularity of many of the early enclosures. The majority of early enclosure fields were regularly-shaped, particularly north of the Kennet, suggesting that they may result from agreements between local land-holders and farmers to rationalise holdings in the common fields or grazing. Most of the common meadows were enclosed into water meadows. This created the largest concentration of water meadows in the district and they covered most of the valley floor between Chilton and Newbury. Remaining areas of open fields and most areas of common land were enclosed by Act of Parliament in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and large areas of Parliamentary fields existed around Hungerford, Kintbury, Elcot and Speen. Freeman's Marsh and Hungerford Common were the common land that remained unenclosed into the 20th century.

The majority of wooded areas were ancient woodland and were located on the upper slopes of the northern valley side or toward the Wiltshire border. Large blocks of ancient woodland existed between Elcot and Hungerford Newtown and between Littlecote Park and Hungerford. A significant loss of ancient woodland occurred in the latter half of the 19th century when an extensive area of Winding Wood, next to Clapton, was cleared for fields.

The medieval market town of Hungerford is the largest settlement within the area and it is sited at a crossing point on the Kennet near its confluence with the Dun. The historic

Historic Environment Character Area

settlement pattern was a mix of nucleated settlements on the valley floor and farms and small hamlets scattered across the upper valley sides. Nucleated settlements, such as Kintbury and Avington, were sited just off the floodplain and seem to be spaced at fairly regular intervals along the valley. There was a mix of hamlets and large farms on the upper valley sides. Some hamlets are the centres of manors and seem to be shrunken medieval settlements, such as Elcot, whilst others may be secondary or subsidiary settlements, such as Hungerford Newtown. Farms were fairly evenly distributed across the upper slopes of the valley and generally lie in areas of irregular early enclosure. Most farms are named after nearby places or topographic features.

Many extensive parklands, such as Elcot and Benham Valence, were established on the lower slopes of the valley.

Modern Landscape

The agricultural landscape has been subject to considerable modification. The majority of historic enclosures have been reorganised into modern fields more suited to mechanised agriculture. Some historic enclosures have escaped reorganisation and examples can be found throughout the area with substantial blocks present between Denford, Hungerford Newtown and Clapton. Another important effect of agricultural change is the loss of water meadows from the valley floor. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, active management of water meadows for early spring grazing ceased. Much of the area that was water meadows is now in use as pasture fields, but significant areas have also become wooded-over through both colonisation and planting, and some have been converted into arable fields. Woodland and arable uses are leading to the erosion and loss of water meadow features through ploughing and root disturbance. The arable extent has been further increased through the enclosure of previously non-arable areas. Conversion of parkland to arable is particularly common and is most visible between Hungerford and Kintbury where large areas of former parks are now fields. Smaller-scale instances of clearance of ancient woodland for farming also exist. Large areas of paddocks have been created around the studs at Templeton and Marsh Benham.

Tree-cover has seen significant change with clearance of ancient woodlands and new woods and plantations created on previously unwooded areas. Although only a few ancient woods were cleared for agriculture, others have been cleared of native tree cover and replanted with other species. Whilst these are still wooded areas they have lost historic woodland features and much of their biodiversity value. Large areas of water meadow have become secondary woodlands through regeneration and scrubbing-over between Hungerford and Kintbury. Woodland plantations of various sizes have been created across the area, many of which have been funded by the Woodland Grant Scheme. Most plantations are rectilinear in shape and do not fit well within the existing grain of the landscape and this is particularly visible between North Standen Farm and Hungerford.

Settlement growth is focussed around Hungerford and Kintbury with only small growth around other historic settlement nuclei in the area. Both Hungerford and Kintbury have expanded since the 1970s with the additions of several large housing estates around the fringes of both settlements.