

CHD Combe High Downs

Topography, Geology and Soils

This is an isolated area of high downs, broadly coinciding with Combe parish, including a section of the Hampshire Downs scarp. The landform, geology and soils are unlike those in neighbouring parts of West Berkshire. The area's geology is entirely formed by chalk which gives rise to clayey palaeo-argyllic brown earths on the highest areas of the ridges and silty brown calcareous earths elsewhere in the area.

Historic Landscape

The area was characterised by extensive common downland grazing and pre-18th century early enclosures around the small settlement at Combe. This is unlike adjacent areas of the district and is much more similar to neighbouring parts of Hampshire recorded by the North Wessex Downs HLC project. Unlike most other downland areas, it is unclear whether there was any earlier open field regime operating in this area during the medieval period. The pattern of the downs scarp, fields and roads created a very sinuous, fluid grain to the landscape.

Woodland was generally not widespread and only small scattered woods were present across the area. The south-western corner of the area, however, was occupied by a large block of ancient woodland, Combe Wood. Most of the large tracts of downland grazing remained unenclosed by the start of the 20th century and only a small area at the north-western corner had been enclosed by Parliamentary enclosure.

It is difficult to assess the form of historic settlements as there are only a few in such a small area. The largest nuclei of settlement were at Combe which lay at the centre of the area in a sheltered hollow between the arms of downs ridges. Combe was comprised of clusters of buildings around a road junction with a church and a manor. It was not a very large settlement and should probably be described as a hamlet. A small group of farms was situated at Eastwick and Lower Eastwick. Both Combe and the Eastwick farms probably represent shrunken or deserted medieval villages.

Modern Landscape

Agricultural change over the second half of the 20th century has led to drastic modification of this area. The arable extent has been greatly increased through the enclosure of much of the downland, and almost all historic enclosures have been reorganised into modern fields better suited to mechanised agriculture. Despite the extension of arable, substantial areas of unenclosed downland survive; it is unclear whether this is due to the impracticalities of cultivation on the scarp slopes or because of a growing awareness of its importance as a habitat. These downland areas are important as they are the largest surviving areas of downland in West Berkshire. The district as a whole has lost around 95% of its known downland.

Huge alteration in tree-cover has also taken place across the area. Some areas of ancient woodland have been replanted and numerous small plantations have been created. The majority of plantations are linear and do not mesh well with the established grain of the landscape. Under-grazed sections of downland have been colonised by tress and this has led to the growth of several blocks of secondary woodland. The overall rise in tree-cover has given the area as a whole a much more densely-wooded appearance than was the case previously.