

PTP Pang-Thames Plateaux

Topography, Geology and Soils

This area contains a series of dry valleys and watersheds between the Pang and Thames valleys and the high downs around Aldworth. The major dry valley within the area runs from Aldworth through Ashampstead to the Pang at Maidenhatch Farm. The geology over much of the area is chalk which is overlain by gravel at the base of the major dry valley. The chalk is capped by Reading Beds around Hartridge Farm, Upper Basildon and by capped Reading Beds and London Clays on the watershed ridge east of Yattendon. Extensive deposits of plateau gravels exist around Upper Basildon. This gives rise to flinty clay palaeo-argyllic brown earths across most of the area with flinty silty brown calcareous earths in the north-eastern corner of the area and clay stagnogley soils at the south-west tip.

Historic Landscape

This area seems to have had a medieval landscape characterised by small fields inter-related with woods and some commons. The combination of land-use and topography gave a very sinuous grain to the historic landscape of the area.

Most of the early enclosures were small irregularly-shaped fields, which suggests that they were created in an ad-hoc manner, perhaps over a long period of time. Many of the fields were probably created by medieval assartment, or clearance of woodland. Burnthill and Ashampstead Commons, two areas of common heathland grazing, were located amidst the intimate network of fields and woods. Unlike many commons, these were not later enclosed. Ashampstead Common, however, had become substantially wooded-over by the end of the 19th century and was no longer an open heathland area.

This was a well-wooded area and most woods have been identified as ancient. Woods existed across the area but the highest concentration was in the south where a belt of several large woodlands existed. Large blocks of other old woods also existed in the middle of the area. Most woods had very irregular edges, as if they had had chunks taken out of them, and this was most visible between Yattendon and Bradfield. It is probable this is due to medieval and later assartment. Some woodland clearance took place during the mid-19th century to create fields at Hewin's Wood, Bradfield and College Wood and Westridge Green.

Settlement was less nucleated and more densely spread across the landscape than in adjacent areas. The historic settlement pattern was varied with dispersed settlements and farms across the southern part of the area and mostly farms and a few hamlets in the north. Most settlement in the south was in hamlets, such as Upper Basildon, and common edge settlements around Burnthill and Ashampstead Commons. The common edge settlements have their roots in squatter occupation by those wishing to exploit the resources of the common. They were in existence by the 18th century but probably date back further. Ashampstead was the largest settlement in the area and consisted of several separate nuclei. Farms had a mix of topographic and occupier names.

Parks existed only in the east of the area and there were only two within the HLCA by the end of the 19th century. A small park was present at Bere Park whilst a very large landscape park existed at Basildon around Basildon House. A large park was laid out

Historic Environment Character Area

over early enclosure fields at the end of the 19th century around Buckhold, a new country house. The designed landscape was very extensive and involved the creation of an ornamental woodland plantation, Great Bear, as well as avenues and a walled garden.

Modern Landscape

Parts of the area have extensive tracts of little-modified landscape and retain considerable historic character, whereas substantial change has occurred over much of the area creating a landscape with a new and different character.

The reorganisation of historic enclosures into fields suited to modern agriculture and the creation of extensive woodland plantations have been the two most substantial changes to the area. The south of the area has seen considerable change with the majority of historic enclosures reorganised and very large areas of conifer plantations established. The plantations are mostly commercial forestry and Christmas-tree growing concerns and many are on areas that were fields. Large plantations have also been created in areas that were ancient woodlands. These woods have been cleared of native tree cover and replanted as commercial plantations. The new plantations at these woods do not have the same biodiversity characteristics as ancient woodlands and clearance and planting are likely to have damaged or removed historic features such as woodbanks. A lack of grazing and some plantation led to dense tree-cover developing on all commons by the middle of the 20th century. The character of the southern part of the area has now changed from a mix of open commons, fields and woods into an almost continuously wooded block. The huge increase in plantation tree-cover has created a very visually enclosed feel to the landscape that did not previously exist.

Across the northern half of the area (north of Ashampstead) large areas of unmodified fieldscapes exist with only a small degree of field reorganisation and plantation. Changes in this part of the area have largely respected the grain of the landscape and much of the historic character remains intact.

Settlement growth has been extensive across the centre of the area and has comprised infill around historic settlement nuclei and growth along the roads between them. New housing has focussed around historic settlement nuclei and has spread along roads that join them. It is a mixture of small estates and developments of a few large houses and much of the housing is affluent in nature with swimming pools and tennis courts being common features. Development has been so intense that it is now hard to tell where one settlement finishes and the next starts. A band of settlement runs from Ashampstead to Upper Basildon and then north on to Basildon and east to Pangbourne. This has created an almost continuous belt of housing uniting several previously separate settlements.

The majority of parklands have experienced either a total change in use or a contraction in the area they cover. This change has been most marked at Buckhold, where much of the former parkland is now a stable and paddocks, the house is occupied by a school and the ornamental woodland has been replaced by a mix of conifer plantation, housing and paddocks. Basildon Park is in the ownership of the National Trust and has not been subject to large-scale alteration, but has transferred to operating as a visitor attraction for part of the year.