

NTQ Newbury – Thatcham Quarries

Historic Character

The zone comprises a number of active and inactive gravel pits on the Kennet floodplain between Newbury and Thatcham. There is ongoing gravel extraction next to the racecourse, but the majority of quarries, which were operational between the 1960s and 1990s, are now disused. Most of the disused quarries have been allowed to flood and form lakes and some are used and managed as nature reserves (eg Thatcham Nature Discovery Centre) or angling lakes. Areas within other former quarries have been restored and have developed a coverage of scrubby woodland. The pre-quarry landscape was composed of meadow land, early enclosure fields and water meadows and it is possible to see traces of this landscape despite the huge extent of extraction, as many of the unquarried baulks between pits are historic field boundaries. There is a single settlement, Lower Farm, within the zone, which dates back at least to the mid-18th century.

Historic Environment

This zone has produced nationally significant remains and has been subject to a high degree of archaeological scrutiny. The zone was covered by the Lower Kennet Valley Survey and several parts saw extensive excavation prior to gravel extraction. Although some Palaeolithic finds were recovered from gravel working at Lower Way, the site is most well known for the remains of Mesolithic occupation. Occupation sites of this period are rare, and the evidence from this site was considered nationally important in understanding Mesolithic life. Neighbouring quarries within the zone have also produced material of this date. The zone as a whole forms one of the most significant areas of Mesolithic evidence within the Kennet, which itself has the highest concentration of Mesolithic activity in the district.

Later Prehistoric and Roman evidence is less common, although some evidence of settlement and burial spanning these periods was found during excavations in advance of quarrying at Lower Farm. An isolated ring ditch known from cropmarks was fully excavated, and although it did not produce any burials, fragments of two urns were recovered which could have held cremations. Probable Romano-British field systems were also identified during evaluation trenching.

Two reports exist for finds of suggested Bronze Age or Saxon spearheads, but otherwise evidence for later archaeological periods is almost entirely absent. Post-medieval and modern material remains are confined to Lower Farm, the canal and related features, and Second World War pillboxes. The canal has been subject to a huge programme of restoration in recent years, and the cut and locks incorporate much new material, whereas its bridges have seen less alteration. The Kennet was part of a major WWII stop line and three pillboxes remain amidst the quarried landscape. These structures were an important component of this system but are now falling into disrepair. A section of the canal and river at the western end of the zone has been designated as a Conservation Area.

Remains of structures related to river exploitation, such as wharves and fish-weirs, may survive within former river channels or the present channel and its banks. Such deposits could range in date from prehistoric to post-medieval and could be well-preserved through waterlogging. Remains of these features are likely to be significant as exploitation of the riverine resources is poorly understood.

Historic Environment Character Zone

Historic Environment Potential

Gravel extraction gave valuable opportunities for the discovery of archaeological remains in this zone but has now removed the majority of the buried archaeological resource. The archaeological potential of the remaining unquarried areas, including pit baulks, is likely to be high. The pillboxes remain poorly recorded and in a deteriorating condition. Elements of features such as wharves and fish-weirs are likely to be preserved within the present river channel.

Historic Environment Action Plan

Conservation Issues

- Development pressure on the zone.
- Continued intensive gravel extraction from valley floor.
- More detail is needed on the historic building stock to ensure appropriate policies are put in place to conserve this resource.
- Conservation Area appraisal and management plan required.
- Management of Kennet and Avon canal and possible impacts on surviving early fabric of locks, bridges, etc.
- Management of WWII features.

Research Priorities

- Can the palaeo-environmental potential of the area be characterised and exploited?
- Do the areas left by previous gravel extraction contain undisturbed archaeological features/deposits?
- Can further Mesolithic sites be identified?
- What was the nature of later prehistoric land-use in the zone?
- Where are the Romano-British settlements? What was their character and function?
- What does the paucity of medieval evidence in the area tell us about land use and socio-economic activity in the zone at this time?
- Does archaeological evidence for the historic management of the river survive, especially in relation to mills and water management?
- Do the historic buildings in the zone contain any information about post-medieval and modern changes to land use and agricultural systems?
- Does archaeological evidence for the early development of the Kennet navigation survive in locks and other canal infrastructure?
- Can the surviving WWII defensive features in the Kennet valleys help us understand the military and political history of that period?