

LVP Lambourn Valley – mostly Prehistoric records

Historic Character

This zone is the northern side of the valley from East Shefford to Welford. Historically the zone was mostly covered by open fields with some areas of ancient woodland on the upper valley sides. The majority of the open field had been enclosed into regularly-shaped fields by the 18th century and these were probably created through agreements between farmers. All of the remaining open field was in Boxford Parish and was enclosed by Act of Parliament in the early 19th century. A large chunk of woodland at Welford woods was cleared and enclosed into fields in the late 19th century. Most fields were large and regularly-shaped. Settlement was almost entirely absent with only two farms in the zone. Both farms were very close together on the Boxford to Leckhampstead road. Courtoak Farm was in existence by the 18th century whilst Bradleywood Farm was established in the early 19th century following Parliamentary enclosure of the zone.

Agricultural mechanisation from the mid-20th century led to changes in this landscape when all existing fields were amalgamated into larger holdings, either through boundary removal or through reorganisation. Many historic features, such as hedgerows, were removed during this process. The majority of fields are large featureless arable expanses and this has adversely affected the historic character of the zone.

Historic Environment

HER records exist in distinct clusters with few records elsewhere. Records are dominated by cropmarks and findspots. Most of the cropmarks were first recorded by the Berkshire Downs Survey or the National Mapping Programme with little other archaeological investigation being carried out.

Some level of prehistoric activity is documented by finds and cropmarks, but this is not as extensive as in adjacent parts of the Lambourn valley. The zone also lacks cropmarks of the later prehistoric/Romano-British field-systems that are widespread in other parts of the valley and adjacent downs. The earliest material recovered from the zone is Neolithic and Bronze Age flintwork found during fieldwalking at Courtoak Farm. Two groups of cropmarks of probable Bronze Age barrows exist, one at the northern edge of the zone by RAF Welford, and the other immediately west of Elton Lane. The Elton Lane group contains at least four ring ditches and has been interpreted as a probable barrow cemetery. A large circular feature lying 100m southwest of this group is thought to be a possible henge. A complex of cropmarks near Elton Wood 500m north of the purported barrow cemetery include a ring ditch and enclosure ditches of probable later prehistoric date. A single cropmarked ring-ditch exists just north of the M4 by the Boxford to Leckhampstead road. The only feature in the zone ascribed an Iron Age date is a cropmark of possible banjo enclosure at the northern edge of the zone by RAF Welford.

Romano-British activity is not widespread and has only been recorded in the zone of ancient woodland clearance at Welford Woods. The records in this zone are significant and include a tomb containing two skeletons and grave goods that was found by a labourer in the mid-19th century, but destroyed without record, and a hoard of 800 4th century coins found by workmen near Nodmoor Corner in 1825.

No medieval material has yet been recorded from this zone and the only features that may be of this date are cropmarks of a hollow-way and lynchets immediately north and west of Courtoak Farm. The lack of records is unsurprising as this zone seems to have been under open field cultivation during this period.

Historic Environment Character Zone

The only recorded post-medieval features are Courtoak Farmhouse and railway sidings. The farmhouse is the only listed building in the zone and is described as dating to c1840. Nothing is known of the nature of the buildings at Bradleywood Farm. Following the establishment of an RAF Welford, a branch line with sidings was constructed to serve the base. This line and associated buildings have now been removed but earthworks of the railway line exist in the field between the base and the M4.

Historic Environment Potential

It is hard to assess the archaeological potential of this zone as a whole, as few records exist. Deposits of Bronze Age to Romano-British date may exist across the zone, particularly where there are cropmarks of potential barrows and known Roman finds. The preservation of deposits may be varied as most of the zone has been ploughed since the medieval period and this may have truncated archaeological layers. The origin of Courtoak Farm is unclear and any deposits relating to early occupation at the site could help in understanding the history and development of this settlement. It is also possible that further significant structural elements exist within the farm buildings. Nothing is known about the nature of the historic farmstead at Bradleywood Farm and it is possible that there may be significant buildings or structural elements.

Historic Environment Action Plan

Conservation Issues

- The open aspect of this zone is part of its historic character; will this be maintained with changing agricultural practices?
- Intensive modern agriculture threatens the resource on buried archaeological sites.
- Development pressure is forcing settlement to expand out of the valley floor onto the lower slopes.
- The potential for Prehistoric and Roman archaeological discoveries is high.

Research Priorities

- What was the nature of land use in the earlier Prehistoric period?
- Does the large circular feature near Elton lane represent a Henge monument?
- Do the locations of the Bronze Age burial mounds tell us anything about the use of the landscape in this period?
- What is the date, function and character of the 'banjo' enclosure? What does this site tell us about the landscape in the Iron Age?
- What are the origins of the farmsteads in the zone?
- Do the historic buildings in the zone contain any information about post-medieval and modern changes to land use and agricultural systems?