

Historic Environment Character Zone

PASS Plantations - Assarts

Historic Character

This is a heavily wooded rural zone on the Pang watershed. Historically, much of the zone was covered by ancient woodlands. The size of these woods varied, but many were extensive and the largest area was the neighbouring Fence and Grimsbury Woods. Some areas of other old woods also existed; most were small, but a large wood of this type, Roundhill Wood, existed on the edge of Fence Wood and Grimsbury Wood. Areas of fields were inter-related with the woods and all were assarts or probable assarts. Settlement was not frequent and was sited near the edges of the zone. Most settlement took the form of farmsteads, although small common-edge settlements existed at Wellhouse and Westrop Green. Westrop Green was the only common heathland in the zone and remained unenclosed into the 20th century. A dense network of roads and tracks ran through the zone and the interplay of these routes with land-use and topography created a very irregular grain to the landscape.

Many changes have occurred in this zone since the mid-20th century. As with other zones, many historic fields have been rationalised through boundary removal and reorganisation into fields better suited to modern mechanised agriculture. However, as alterations have been largely carried out within the grain of the landscape and because significant areas of assarts survive within the zone, these changes have not significantly eroded its character. Housing growth has been limited, and is confined to construction of a few houses at Wellhouse. The biggest change has been in the nature of the tree-cover. The majority of the ancient woods, including the extensive Fence Wood and Grimsbury Wood, have been cleared of native trees. Replanted woods have a significantly different character, usually with densely planted single species trees, which lack the biodiversity of ancient woodlands. This has caused a significant change in the feel of the landscape, which has been reinforced by the establishment of several plantations on the edges of ancient woods across the zone. The grain of this zone's landscape remains largely intact, but the character has been totally altered due to the replacement of broadleaf mixed woodland with single-species plantations.

Historic Environment

HER records are unevenly distributed and records largely come from the northern end of the zone. The records comprise a mix of earthworks, structures and findspots, and most are of prehistoric or Romano-British date. The zone was covered by the Berkshire Downs Survey and the National Mapping Programme and some limited archaeological work has been carried out at known sites.

Evidence for prehistoric activity is dominated by the late prehistoric hillfort of Grimsbury Castle. The hillfort survives as substantial earthworks within Grimsbury Wood and is the only scheduled ancient monument in the zone. Little archaeological investigation has taken place, but excavations on the entrance in the 1960s have shown several phases of rampart and entrance construction. The only other evidence of prehistoric activity in the zone comes from finds of Neolithic and Bronze Age flints made at Pikes Row during fieldwalking and some possible Iron Age lynchets in Rook's Copse. This was probably a well-used zone in later prehistory, but little evidence of activity has yet been found across the remainder of the zone.

Romano-British activity has been recorded at two locations. A villa was discovered during ploughing immediately east of Wellhouse in the early 19th century. The site was partially excavated and contained remains of walls and mosaics. A significant complex of earthworks and structures exist in Box Wood and Rook's Copse at the northern tip of the zone. The

Historic Environment Character Zone

structures have been interpreted as a religious complex containing a temple, shrines, a processional way and a possible guest-house for visitors to the site. This site is in an area of ancient woodland, but much has been replanted mechanically, which poses a threat to the continued survival of earthworks and deposits.

No early or late medieval features or finds have been recorded from this zone. This probably reflects the zone being wooded during these periods. The only post-medieval features in the zone are standing buildings. There are seven listed buildings in the zone and all but one are at Wellhouse Farm. The Wellhouse Farm buildings consist of late 17th-19th century farm buildings that have recently been converted into residential usage and were subject to a programme of historic building recording. The other listed building is a 17th century cottage at Westrop Green. An unlisted folly tower exists in the middle of Grimsbury Castle and is now in use as a house.

Historic Environment Potential

Areas of clear potential for later prehistoric deposits exist at Grimsbury Castle and for Romano-British deposits at Wellhouse and Box Wood/Rook's Copse, but the potential of the zone as a whole is hard to assess on the available evidence. Further deposits from these periods possibly exist in the zone but the location, nature and quality of any below-ground archaeology is unspecified. The origin and nature of the settlement within the zone is also unclear. Both Westrop Green and Wellhouse were in existence by the 18th century, and Wellhouse may have had medieval origins but little else is known. The historic building stock is not extensive and is poorly understood and poorly recorded. Listed buildings focus on Wellhouse Farm and it is possible that further significant structures may be identified in the hamlets or farmsteads of the zone.

Historic Environment Action Plan

Conservation Issues

- Management of woodlands, conservation of surviving ancient woodlands and replacement of plantations with more mixed tree coverage.
- Management of archaeological sites within woodland to ensure root/wind blow damage does not occur.
- Use of Grimsbury Camp by cyclists and off-road motorcycles.
- Historic building stock is poorly understood and little protection is currently afforded to this resource.

Research Priorities

- Do unrecorded archaeological sites/features survive within the wooded areas?
- What evidence survives of early prehistoric exploitation of this landscape?
- What is the date and function of Grimsbury Castle and its related outworks?
- What was the nature of the later prehistoric land-use context around Grimsbury Castle?
- What is the nature and date of the Romano-British site in Box Wood? How does it relate to the 'Villa' at Wellhouse?
- What is the date and nature of the 'Villa' at Wellhouse?
- Does archaeological evidence survive for structures/dwellings associated with medieval assarting activity?
- What are the dates, function and significance of the historic buildings in the zone?