

SWH Stockcross – Wickham Heaths

Historic Character

This is a heavily wooded zone occupying the south-eastern tip of the Lambourn – Kennet watershed. Historically, much of the zone was occupied by the extensive heathland common of Wickham Heath, and a mix of early enclosures, woods, and small-medium sized parklands were located on its fringe. Most of the common was enclosed into fields in the early 19th century by a series of Acts of Parliament and only the area at Sole Common remains unenclosed. The historic settlement pattern was dispersed and settlements were located on the edge of the common, such as Stockcross, Wickham, and Hoe Benham. Stockcross grew in the early 19th century and the settlement at Wickham Heath seems to have been established at this time. This may be due to resettlement of commoners displaced by the enclosure of the common.

The zone has been transformed over the course of the 20th Century by agricultural changes and afforestation. Most fields have been altered to some extent and the only area of largely unmodified historic enclosures is between Hoe Benham and Ownham. The majority of Parliamentary enclosures on the heath have been turned into conifer plantations. This had begun by the 1880s, but the majority were created in the mid-20th century. It is likely that the heath was soon found to be unsuited to agriculture after its enclosure and trees brought in as the most productive use of the land. This has altered the feel of the landscape from a visually very open one, with long-distance views to the Kennet and Lambourn valleys and to the high downs, to a very enclosed zone with short horizons due to the density and extent of tree-plantations.

The zone remains sparsely occupied despite some growth at most historic settlement nuclei. Most growth has been at Stockcross and it is nearly double the size of its historic core.

Parklands at Foley Lodge and Deanwood have been adapted for recreational use and are now home to the Vineyard hotel at Stockcross and a small golf course.

Historic Environment

HER records are patchily distributed across the zone; most are found around Wickham in the north or Stockcross at the southern end, but nothing has been recorded in between. The zone was covered by several survey projects and fieldwalking was undertaken at Wickham and Ownham by the Berkshire Downs Survey. Below ground observations have been limited to watching briefs on pipelines, and no excavations are known in the zone. Much of the zone was common heathland and large parts are now covered by dense tree plantations. Both are landuses that can mask the extent of buried archaeology and may be partly responsible for the paucity of records.

Prehistoric material is scarce in this zone and consists of Neolithic and early Bronze Age flintwork from fieldwalking during the Berkshire Downs Survey. Neolithic and early Bronze Age monuments, and Iron Age field systems and settlement, are documented in adjacent areas, and it is possible that this activity was also present in this zone but has not yet been recognised.

The Roman road between Silchester and Cirencester, Ermin Street, runs through the north of the zone and short earthwork sections of it have been located. Roman pottery and building material has been found at several locations around Wickham. It is thought that Wickham may be the site of a roadside settlement, *Spinae*, known from Roman itineraries to lie along this stretch of Ermin Street.

Historic Environment Character Zone

Early medieval evidence has so far only been found at Wickham. A church has existed at the village since at least the 10th or 11th century and the present church tower dates to this period, but the early development and origin of the settlement at Wickham is unclear. Late medieval evidence is confined to a few findspots near Wickham and Stockcross.

Post-medieval evidence is limited and comprises brickworks sites at Wickham and Stockcross and some standing buildings. There are ten listed buildings; most are sited in and around Wickham and Stockcross. Little is known in general about the historic building stock of the zone, particularly that of Hoe Benham. The majority of listed buildings are 17th and 18th century cottages apart from the churches at both Wickham and Stockcross. Stockcross and Hoe Benham were both in existence by the 18th century but little else is known about the origin and development of either settlement.

Historic Environment Potential

It is hard to quantify the potential of this zone as so little investigation of below-ground deposits or standing buildings has been conducted. Prehistoric deposits are possible and further evidence of the Roman road and deposits related to the putative Roman settlement at Wickham are likely. Tree plantation may have caused truncation of deposits through root disturbance or machining associated with planting and clearance.

Any deposits or structural remains relating to early occupation at Wickham, Stockcross and Hoe Benham will be significant in understanding the development of settlement in this zone. Much of the historic building stock has not been studied and it has potential to contain further important buildings and yield significant information about each settlement.

Historic Environment Action Plan

Conservation Issues

- There is continued development pressure in the area, much of it unsympathetic in scale and design. This could lead to further erosion of the historic character.
- Management of Common for nature conservation could present opportunities to restore some of the historic character.
- Ancient woodland has not been well managed in recent years and this poses a threat to its survival.
- Historic building stock is poorly understood and little protection is currently afforded to this resource.
- Does the Roman Road survive as an earthwork feature within the plantations?

Research Priorities

- What information survives about the formation of the common and early prehistoric land-use?
- Is the Romano British settlement activity at Wickham related to the recorded settlement of *Spinae*? What is the date, character and extent of this settlement? Can continuity of activity into the early and later medieval periods be found at Wickham?
- Does evidence survive on the nature and origins of the medieval settlement?
- What are the origins of the brickworks in the zone? How significant were they and where were their main markets?
- What are the date, function and significance of the historic buildings in the area?