

## *Historic Environment Character Zone*

### **AUNS Aldermaston, Ufton Nervet, Sulhamsteads**

#### **Historic Character**

This large zone is a predominantly rural area of irregularly-shaped fields, numerous dispersed small settlements, extensive wooded areas and a number of parklands. It is served by a dense network of tracks and narrow roads which has created a fine-grained, intimate landscape. Much of the framework of the landscape dates back to before the 18<sup>th</sup> century as most settlements, fields and tracks were in existence by this time. The division between farmed and unfarmed land was also well-established by this date with large areas of ancient and other historic woodlands across the zone and extensive tracts of common heathland on the high ground towards the Hampshire border. This division is still quite similar and visible in the present landscape, with much of the woodland remaining and most heathland areas now largely under woodland plantation. Changes in farming have led to modification of some historic enclosures and a slight fluctuation in arable cultivation.

Historically settlement was fairly dense and characterised by dispersed hamlets, farmsteads and poly-focal settlements, with only a single nucleated village at Aldermaston. It is thought that Aldermaston is an exception because it is likely that the present village was created in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to resettle dispossessed villagers. Aldermaston Park was enlarged at this time to include the parish church, and it is thought that the medieval and Saxon village was cleared from this site so the land could be incorporated into the park. There has been only modest growth in housing across the zone and most of it has been small in scale and has occurred around historic settlement nuclei, particularly those adjacent to Aldermaston Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE). Aldermaston Park and AWE form a separate HECZ (*MA*) protruding into *AUNS*; elsewhere, the settlements of Burghfield and Burghfield Common form another HECZ (*BCUL*) in the middle of this zone.

Gravel workings, such as Raghill Quarry, are becoming an increasingly common feature of the landscape. The extensive plateau gravel deposits are starting to be worked on a much greater scale than previously as deposits on the Kennet Valley floor become exhausted. Some disused extractions have been restored to arable land; however these fields differ in pattern and character from those that existed prior to quarrying, and represent the creation of a new fieldscape and not the restoration of the historic fieldscape.

Despite some significant changes, the grain of the landscape has not yet been significantly altered and the zone still retains a historic feel.

#### **Historic Environment**

There has been a considerable amount of archaeological work carried out in some parts of the zone, focussing mainly on the Kennet Valley, quarries and the Bronze Age barrow cemeteries at Brimpton Common and Holden's Firs. Much of this has been survey work, including fieldwalking; excavations have only taken place at a handful of locations scattered across the zone, generally prior to mineral extraction. Activity of all periods has been documented, mainly through finds, earthworks and limited excavation. A general spread of prehistoric activity is present over most of the zone and includes securely dateable material from each period. There is most evidence from the Bronze Age with the two partially scheduled barrow cemeteries on the crest of the watershed with Hampshire, and other structural evidence from the valley sides. Iron Age evidence is limited and found mainly around Brimpton Common.

Several Roman roads, including Ermin Street, run through this zone, but little other Roman period material is known. It is likely that this zone would have been exploited during the Roman

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period as it lies adjacent to the Roman town at Silchester and is crossed by major and minor routes connecting it to other settlements. It has been suggested that the stretches of linear earthwork known collectively as Grim's Bank I and II were constructed across these approaches to Silchester, but dating evidence for these banks and ditches is difficult to obtain, despite several archaeological attempts. Many elements of Grim's Bank are scheduled monuments although it is likely that other elements of this complex system are not statutorily protected. They may have been a territorial feature from the later Iron Age through to at least the end of the Romano-British period if not later.

Definite early medieval evidence is generally meagre and dominated by the probable high-status settlement and minster church at Aldermaston. However, Ufton Nervet, Padworth, Wasing are all recorded in the Domesday Survey.

Later medieval evidence is also fairly sparse and concentrated around Aldermaston, Wasing, Ufton Nervet and the Sulhamsteads, and is composed mainly of settlement features, including standing buildings, and parks (including two deer parks). There are at least two moated sites in the zone, at Ufton Nervet and Sulhamstead Abbots, both of which are scheduled monuments, and there may have been a third at Burghfield Place. Ufton Court is an important Elizabethan mansion with more scheduled fishponds and a small park. There is a significant number of listed buildings; most are houses and buildings within hamlets, and very few are in farmsteads, or sited within common-edge settlements. Aldermaston Village is the only designated Conservation Area in this zone. The parkland at Wasing is included on the English Heritage Register of Parks and Gardens, as is the Getrude Jekyll garden at Folly Farm in Sulhamstead (a farmhouse enlarged by Sir Edwin Lutyens). Elements of designed landscape survive in unregistered parks around Culverlands in Burghfield, Sulhamstead House and Padworth House, the latter two listed country houses now converted for educational and training purposes.

This zone also includes a little known site of modern historical significance at Blacknest, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century country house used for academic research in connection with the Atomic Weapons Establishments. A characterisation exercise has recently been carried out for all the AWE sites (including Aldermaston in *MA* and Burghfield in *MB*) and this has identified significant heritage features and outlined management issues.

### **Historic Environment Potential**

The zone is not developed on a large scale and the presence of buried archaeology has been demonstrated by the few excavations that have occurred; therefore the zone should be considered to have a high archaeological potential. Prehistoric and Roman material is most likely to be encountered across the zone and early and later medieval deposits are likely within settlements. Any deposits relating the Saxon and medieval settlement at Aldermaston are also significant and could help to shed light on nature and form of this settlement.

### **Historic Environment Action Plan**

#### Conservation Issues

- Intensive modern agriculture threatens the resource on buried archaeological sites.
- Continued intensive gravel extraction from valley floor and plateau sites.
- Conservation Area Appraisal and management plan is overdue.
- More detail is needed on the historic building stock to ensure appropriate policies are put in place to conserve this resource.
- Development pressure.

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- Management of WWII features.
- Management of woodlands, conservation of surviving ancient woodlands and replacement of plantations with more mixed tree coverage.

#### Research Priorities

- Does the general spread of prehistoric material across the zone represent settlement activity? Where are prehistoric settlements most likely to occur?
- Does the location of the barrow cemeteries at Brimpton Common and Holden's Firs give us information about the utilisation of the landscape in the Bronze Age? Are any of the barrows undisturbed?
- Can the line of the Roman road be established? Do any related roadside settlements exist?
- What is the date and function of Grim's Bank? How does it relate to the late Iron Age and Roman activity at Silchester?
- What are the origins of the villages in the zone? Does evidence for early medieval settlement activity survive?
- What was the nature of the activity at the moated sites? Why are they separated from the main settlement foci?
- 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?
- What are the origins of Wasing Park? Does it contain features/information that could help explain the development of designed landscapes?
- Was Aldermaston subject to 'emparkment'?