

Historic Environment Character Zone

LLV Lower Lambourn Valley

Historic Character

This zone comprises the lower Lambourn valley slopes on either side of the river south of the M4. Historically, land-cover was mixed, with open fields and small ancient woods and commons to the east of the river; land west of the river was covered by irregularly-shaped early enclosures interspersed with small commons and ancient woods. The open field and common land west of the river was enclosed by Act of Parliament in the early 19th century, but Boxford Common remained unenclosed. Settlement was sparse east of the river and limited to two farms, Boxford Farm and Wyfield Farm. West of the river, settlement was denser and composed of several farms and a small hamlet at Ownham.

Agricultural mechanisation from the mid-20th century led to changes in this landscape as 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 and a much more regular fieldscape has been created. The increased regularity and size of fields has created large arable expanses and has adversely affected the historic character of the zone.

Historic Environment

HER records are fairly densely distributed across the zone and are dominated by cropmarks and findspots. The zone was covered by the Berkshire Downs Survey and the National Mapping Programme and both added significant numbers of records to the HER. Other work has been limited and consists of excavation by local archaeologists on Boxford Common and building recording at Boxford Farm.

Significantly more evidence of prehistoric activity exists in this zone than in adjacent parts of the valley and watershed. Palaeolithic material is absent from surrounding areas, but has been recovered near Woodspeen and Mesolithic material was also found at this location and at Ownham Farm. Neolithic material is also more widespread and flint tools have been found at Wyfield Farm, Westbrook Farm, Coombesbury Farm and Boxford Common and at several sites around Easton and Ownham. Bronze Age artefacts have been found at Ownham, Wyfield Farm, Westbrook Farm, Coombesbury Farm and Boxford Common. Further evidence of Bronze Age activity comes from probable barrow sites. There are cropmarks of four ring-ditches between Westbrook Farm and Borough Hill and a circular earthwork at Boxford Farm has been interpreted by some as a barrow, although this feature might be a post-medieval windmill mound. Iron Age activity is documented mainly by cropmarks of enclosures and field systems of later prehistoric/Romano-British date. Cropmarks are most widespread east of the river, but two possible banjo enclosures also exist in the west at Tullock Farm. A possible hillfort exists on Borough Hill; this was mapped as a circular bank in the late 19th century, but it is unclear whether this earthwork survives as the site is now heavily wooded. A series of circular features were excavated on Boxford Common in the 1930s. These contained early Iron Age pottery and were initially interpreted as hearths, but are now thought to be pits. It is not clear what kind of activity is represented by these features.

Significant Romano-British activity, in addition to the field-systems, is documented in this zone. The line of Ermin Street, the Roman road from Silchester to Cirencester, runs through the south-western side of the zone. A section of the road was excavated in the 1930s and several finds have been recovered from its route at Wickham. A villa exists south of Wyfield Farm within the densest area of cropmarked field-systems. This was partially investigated in the late 19th

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century, but most of the villa remains unexcavated and is known only from cropmarks and scatters of building material. Another building of this period has also been recorded on Hoar Hill from scatters of building material and cropmarks.

Records for medieval activity are uncommon and consist mainly of finds. Large concentrations of finds from an area immediately north of Boxford Farm have been interpreted as being from an early Saxon cemetery. The extent of this site and whether any related settlement or other features exist is unknown. It is likely that Ownham and the majority of historic farms were established during the medieval period but no evidence of settlements of this date has yet been found.

Most post-medieval records are of buildings and railway features. The Lambourn Valley railway was constructed through the zone in the 1890s and had stations at Woodspeen and Boxford. It was closed in 1973, and most elements of it, including stations, were removed, but the line of the railway is preserved in places as a wooded earthwork. There are 16 listed buildings in the zone; all are farm buildings or domestic structures and the majority are 19th century farmhouses or 18th century barns. Four 17th century structures are also listed: cottages at Westbrook and Sole Farmhouse. There are no buildings listed or recorded on the HER for the historic settlements at Woodspeen, Tullock Farm and High Street Farm and nothing is known of their historic building stock.

Historic Environment Potential

Deposits of Bronze Age to Romano-British date are likely across the zone. However, preservation 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 settlement is poorly understood and any deposits relating to early occupation at Ownham or the farm sites could help to understand their history and development. Knowledge of the historic building stock is patchy, and it is possible that further significant buildings or structural elements may exist, particularly at Woodspeen, Tullock Farm and High Street Farm.

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 zone has high potential for Prehistoric and Roman archaeological discoveries.
- Ancient woodland has not been well managed in recent years and this poses a threat to its survival.
- There is a need to ensure that any new tree planting avoids the visually and archaeologically erosive impacts of recent plantations. Where possible opportunities to soften the impact of recent plantations should be encouraged.

Research Priorities

- What was the nature of land use in the earlier Prehistoric period?
- Do the locations of the Bronze Age burial mounds tell us anything about the use of the landscape in this period?

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- What is the date, function and character of the 'banjo' enclosures? What do these sites tell us about the landscape in the Iron Age?
- Is the site on Borough Hill an Iron Age Hillfort? Does it survive as an earthwork feature?
- What is the date and nature of the villa site at Wyfield farm? Do more low status settlements exist in the zone?
- Do the finds north of Boxford farm represent an early Saxon cemetery?
- 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?