

Merton Parish

Neighbourhood Plan 2023

Summary

Neighbourhood planning is a way for communities to decide the future of the places where they live and work. This is part of the Localism Act 2011 and is to facilitate the devolution of decision-making powers from central government to individuals and communities^{[11], [12], [13]}.

Communities, working with a Parish Council, can propose where new housing, shops and businesses can be located, and what they should look like.

This plan supersedes the Merton Neighbourhood Plan of 2013, currently available here: cherwell.gov.uk/info/221/neighbourhood-plans/399/merton-neighbourhood-plan

Introduction

Currently, there is a national shortage of housing, affordable being in particularly short supply. All councils have been tasked with identifying what land could be made available. The proposals from this document will be submitted to Cherwell District Council (CDC), however, it should be noted that CDC are not guaranteed to accept the findings. Not having a neighbourhood plan could result in CDC making the planning decisions without consulting the local population.

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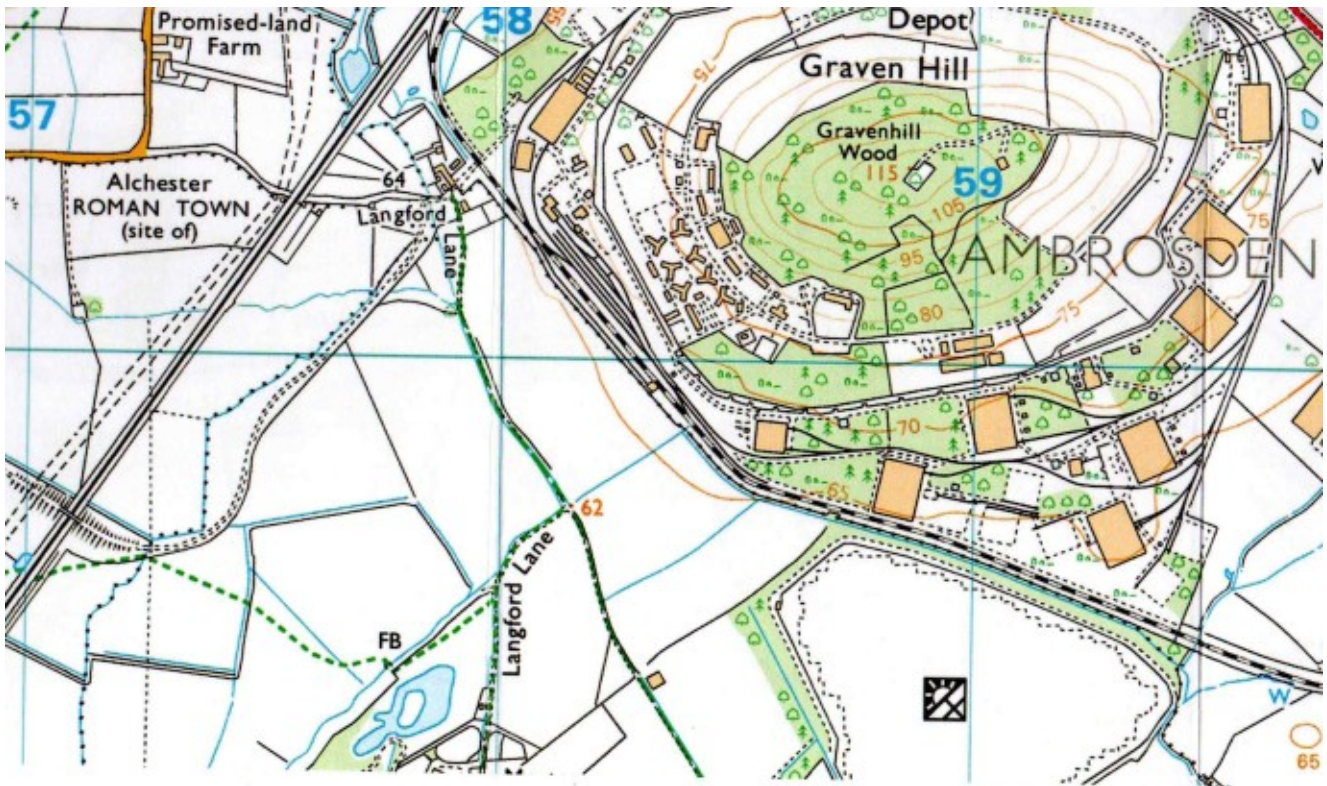
Definition of parish boundaries

The parish boundary is shown on Ordnance Survey Explorer map OS 180^[2]. Note that the boundary changed at the Northern part between OS 180 dated 2006, and OS 180 dated 2015, when it was made to follow the Southern side of the military railway. More detail can be seen on the Yellow Maps^[1] edition which is just a 1:16000 scaled up printing of the 1:25000 Ordnance Survey data.

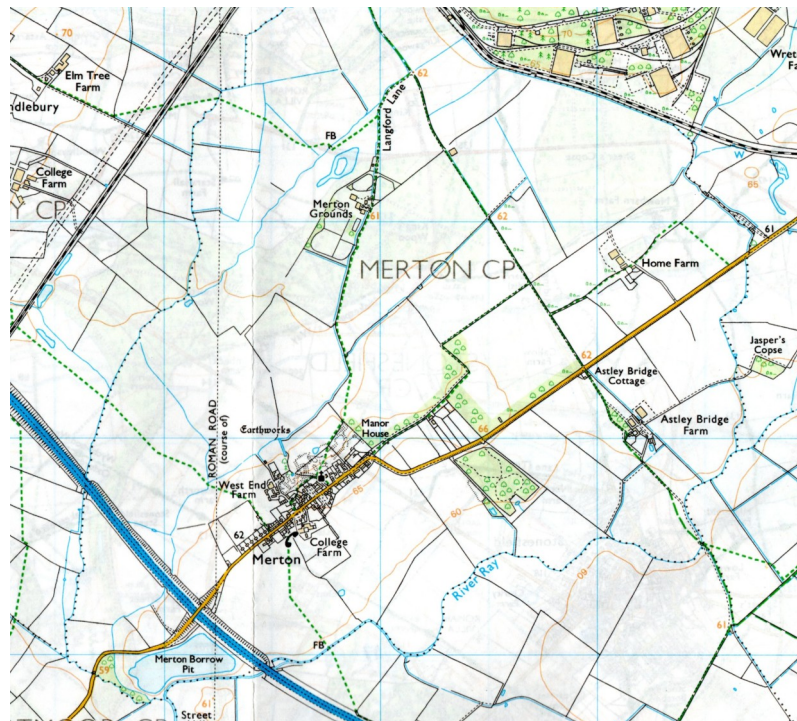


A general view of the entire parish^[3]

Merton Parish is split across two pages of OS 180, and this is reflected in the expanded detail shown below.



Northern part of the parish, from ^[1]



Southern part of the parish, from ^[2]. The larger scale map, ^[6], has the Yellow Maps title information across part of the parish and could not be used.

Starting from the point where the parish boundary crosses the Islip road at the culvert West of the Borrow Pit (51.848836°N, 1.177308°W on Google maps), the line heads East along the drainage ditch until it joins the River Ray. The boundary line follows the Ray upstream, East of Astley Bridge Farm, the heads North along a drainage ditch, passing West of Jasper's Copse. The ditch meanders Northward up to the Ambrosden road, crossing at the culvert located at 51.865109°N, 1.134461°W. The boundary follows ditches up to the Southern edge of the military railway and along the tracks to the point where Langford Lane crosses. The line heads South West across a field until it meets a ditch and then follows ditches in a South Westerly direction until it goes under the M40. From there, the boundary follows various ditches back to the culvert at 51.848836°N, 1.177308°W.

Population

The precise figure for the number of residents is not available publicly. Even if it were, it would be more than likely that the figure would be out of date by the time that this report was issued.

The other method is to count the number of houses using Royal Mail's post code checker; this is the de facto place that commercial companies go to for advertising campaigns and similar enterprises. The number of houses based on postcodes, and excluding double entries where a business is registered at the same address, is 134. The Office For National Statistics reported a figure of 27.2 million households in 2017, with an average of 2.4 occupants^[14]. This gives an approximate figure of 322 people in Merton Parish.

Social life, schools, churches

The noticeboard

This is attached to the right-hand exterior wall of the bus shelter; the shelter is, roughly, in the centre of the village. This is where parish council minutes and agendas, along with other official communiqués are posted.

Facebook group

There is a village Facebook account, "Merton Village". The page is visible to everyone, but only those who are registered can add posts. This is the place to find out what's happening in and around the village.

Woodland and the volunteer group

Situated ¼ mile out of the village, on the road towards Ambrosden, is a woodland that was planted to commemorate the millennium. It is owned by the village and is for everyone to enjoy. It is accessible via a footpath and there are 17 acres of trees which were planted in 2002. There are benches set up in parts of the woodland so that the area can be enjoyed by those less able. There is a woodland group who maintain the area and keep it tidy.

Merton women's group

There is a specific women's Facebook group. New members can be added by request.

Parish council website

This website, mertonparishcouncil.co.uk, shows parish council meeting minutes and agendas. There are sections on village history, the woodland, and local news.

Village Hall

This is used for various village events. It is adjacent to the playing fields and available to hire for parties or other functions. Hiring costs, restrictions and details are available from a bookings clerk. The hall has a space for functions, 40 chairs and a number of tables. There is a kitchen area with a hob, kettle and fridge/freezer. Some crockery and glasses are available.

Playground

Close by the village hall car park is the children's play area. There are various attractions and activities for younger children. There are no facilities for older children and young adults.

Allotments

There are allotments located on the playing fields. The rent is under £20 per plot per annum but varies between plots due to differing sizes. The hire term starts on 1st May. Tenants should be residents of the Merton parish. However, tenants from outside the parish are considered subject to availability.

Village playing field

The 7 acre playing fields belong to the Parish Council and is located up a short road that is signposted Village Hall. There is a small car park where the bottle bank is located. The field has football posts and two basketball hoops.

St. Swithun's

The church holds regular services and the dates and times are shown in the porch, and on the noticeboard by the church gate. Contact details for the churchwardens are displayed on a notice posted within the church porch. With the normal services, there are also various special events around Easter, harvest festival and Christmas.

The vicar looks after the Ray Valley Benefice which, along with Merton, includes the parishes of Piddington, Blackthorn, Arncott and Ambrosden. This means that Sunday services rotate around the churches of the benefice.

Congregational chapel

This was built in 1852 and renovated in 1982. Some time after that date, it was deconsecrated and became a private dwelling.

Schools

The village school closed in 1913. The nearest primary schools are Islip or Ambrosden. There are secondary schools in Bicester and Kidlington.

Services And Infrastructure

Gas

There is no gas supply to the village.

Mains water supplies

Merton is connected to the mains water system but suffers from low water pressure periodically. Sewage is pumped out of the village and treated elsewhere.

Internet and 'phone lines

The village still has the old BT wiring and some of this is showing its age. Crackly lines are quite common, mostly due to aged wiring getting corroded. Mobile signals get good service from the major networks but there is no 5G available yet.

There is fibre from the exchange in Charlton-on-Otmoor to the cabinet, which is sited at the South Western end of the village, and speeds up to 30Mb/s can be achieved. The effect of the ailing copper or aluminium wiring from the cabinet to the houses may manifest as periodic micro drop-outs in the connection. There is no fibre to the premises, although there is a scheme being put in place by Oxfordshire Council to roll out fibre to all premises in the future.

Electricity

The village electricity supply is via overhead lines and is subject to periodic outages caused by falling trees and similar issues.

Oil for heating

There are local companies who supply heating oil. A village group exists that organises deliveries to multiple households in order to reduce delivery charges.

Digital TV

The television reception is excellent due to the proximity of the mast at Beckley.

Shops

There is no shop in the village. The nearest shops are in Ambrosden where there is a Post Office and a Costco.

Pub

There is no pub in the village. The nearest is two miles away in Ambrosden.

Doctors, dentists and hospitals

The two nearest doctors' surgeries are Islip Medical Practice, about four miles away, and Langford Village, Bicester, also four miles away.

Bicester Community Hospital provides inpatient rehabilitation and palliative care. It has a walk-in first aid facilities and a by-appointment out-of-hours GP service. This is about 5 miles away. The John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford, has an A&E centre open 24 hours a day. This is around ten miles away.

There are dentists in Bicester and Kidlington.

Veterinary practises

Bicester Vets are 6 miles away, and Beaumont Veterinary Group, Kidlington, is seven miles away. The 24 hour emergency vets is in Woodstock and is seven miles away.

Post box

There is one post box located close to the bus shelter and opposite the old pub. The collection is Monday-Friday 4.30pm and Saturday 9 am. Royal Mail deliveries arrive around 13:00 in the village.

Later collections are made from the box in Sheep Street, Bicester and are Monday-Friday 6.30pm, Saturday 12:15. Parcels and other secure mail services that cannot be left on a doorstep can be collected from the sorting office in Murdock Road, Bicester.

Bin collections

The bins are collected on alternate weeks, landfill one week and then recycling the following week. The exception is food waste which is collected every week.

In addition to the various bins, some items may be placed upon, or beside, the blue bin.

- Small electrical items can be put on top of the bin. Use a plastic bag if they are small or there are a number of items.
- Spent batteries can be put in a bag and placed on top of the blue bin.
- Cardboard packaging that is too big to put in the blue bin can be stacked against it for collection.

The nearest recycling centre, or tip, is at Ardley. This is on the other side of Bicester, about 7 miles away.

These items can be recycled locally:

- Glass – the closest bottle bank is beside the village hall. There are many others scattered around Bicester.
- Metal – other than Ardley, there are two metal recycling bins in Bicester; one is in the Tesco car park, just after the petrol station, the other is in the car park at Homebase.
- Clothes and shoes – the closest is in a car park beside the Cosco in Ambrosden. There are others in Tesco's car park and Homebase's car park.

If large items need to be taken away, a special collection must be booked on the council's website. This service is subject to a charge.

Dog waste bins

For dog walkers, there are three dog waste bins. One is at the entrance to the village hall car park, the second is behind the church along a small access path and the third is at the woodland.

Transport

The main method of getting around is by car. There is a good road that runs from Ambrosden, through Merton, to Islip. This works well for most of the time but is liable to localised flooding at the Oddington Crossing junction, the turning to Murcott and Fencott and where Gallos Brook runs under a bridge close to Islip. So far, no flooding has been severe enough to close the route through Ambrosden.

Recent new housing development in Ambrosden has closed the road and forced Northbound traffic to divert via Fencott, Murcott, Arncott and back to Ambrosden. This adds eight miles to the journey. This route is also subject to localised flooding, Fencott being the worst part.

Merton is on a designated gritting route for Winter snow.

Bus

There is one bus service through the village, the H5, which goes from Bicester Manorsfield Road stand 4 to the John Radcliff Hospital (JR) West Wing and then back again. This runs hourly from Monday through to Saturday, but not on Sundays or during the night.

For onward travel, Bicester Village Station connects to Oxford Station and London Marylebone. Bicester North Station is on the Marylebone to Birmingham Moor Street line. Rail services through Bicester are good due to Bicester Village shopping centre attracting a lot of visitors.

The school bus doesn't take other passengers, and only goes to Kidlington.

Designated footpaths and bridleways

Outside of the village, there are no footpaths by the side of the roads so walking and even cycling is problematic. There are four designated rights of way shown on the Ordnance Survey maps^[6], these being:

- A path heading South, across the River Ray, over the M40 and on to the Fencott to Murcott road.
- The old footpath to Ambrosden ran straight up to that village and behind the church. This has been diverted at the junction with Langford Lane and the Northern section has been lost.
- The old path or track to Bicester that runs from the village centre, behind St. Swithun's and up to Langford Lane. The Northern part was lost when Graven Hill became a military base in WW1 and the path diverted West towards the ancient site of Alchester.
- A path heading across the playing field to Wendlebury. This used to be the route to Wendlebury Halt station. The station opened in 1905 and closed in 1926.

North of the village, Langford Lane heads South East through Astley Bridge Farm and then splits into two, one branch heading down to Murcott and the other up to Lower Arcott.

Ecology and protected species buffering and strategic environment assessment (SEA)

The Ray valley is rich in wildlife due in no small part to its close proximity to Otmoor^[9] which has status as a SSSI. Otmoor is a natural floodplain for the river. Part of it is a military firing range which has restricted public access and allows wildlife to avoid human interference. There is a RSPB reserve^[15] on Otmoor which is managed specifically for wildlife and has a wide range of species.

The River Ray is a wildlife corridor that connects Otmoor, The Borrow Pit, Merton Woodland, Jasper's Copse and then up to the military railway and Arcott Bridge. The railway is another corridor that leads along the Northern edge of Merton Parish up to Langford Lane. The parish is criss-crossed by drainage ditches, all of which interlink to give wildlife access across the parish and beyond.

Merton Woodland is managed for sustainability and has a diverse ecosystem that has taken just over twenty years to establish. The Borrow Pit was created when gravel was excavated during the construction of the M40, 1987 to 1989. Jasper's Copse is on agricultural land and there is no public access.

Information about the wide variety of species on the RSPB Otmoor reserve can be found on the website^[15]. Merton Borrow Pit is on private land but has some public access and doesn't get the same number of visitors so the reports of sightings there is limited. Even so, it is a recognised birdwatching spot^[16]. The Borrow Pit provides a Winter refuge for migrating waterfowl as it rarely freezes over completely.

There is not room here to list all the species that have been recorded in the area. Grass snakes and brown hares are regular sightings, and deer have been known to visit gardens in search of food.

There is a single reference to a domestic cat catching a "salamander". This is likely to have been either a palmate newt or a great crested newt as salamanders, specifically the fire salamander, are an introduced species. However lifelong residents of the village remember, as children, catching and playing with these creatures.

Of specific interest are the great crested newts that live in the parish. There are a protected species^[17] and can be found at RSPB Otmoor, the large pond behind West End Farm as well as any dry stone wall that can provide shelter from the weather and predators.

Extension of churchyard

Currently, there are about 30 available plots in St. Swithun's graveyard. This information came from private conversation with Lawrence Comiskey, one of the churchwardens. The churchyard is bounded by houses on two sides and the main road at the front. This leaves expansion at the back into the field identified as Court Close should the need arise.

Historical sites

Mesolithic and Neolithic^{[7], [18]}

Little Mesolithic evidence has been recovered, but flints dated to this period have been found South of the River Ray^[18]. The absence of artefacts or structures is not surprising as these tend to be very small and scattered^[18]. Later ploughing has truncated former ground surfaces.

Neolithic flint evidence has been found around The Borrow Pit when it was excavated prior to the M40 being built. Neolithic axes have been found 1km North of the Borrow Pit^[18].

Bronze age^{[7], [18]}

Early Bronze Age barrow ditches were found when The Borrow Pit was excavated^[7].

Iron Age^[7]

An Iron Age ring ditch was found when when The Borrow Pit was excavated^[7]. There are other ring ditches known in this area. Two barrows were identified at The Borrow Pit.

Roman^{[1], [4], [6] & [8]}

Roman activity was centred at Alchester^[19], where a town was built at the junction of the Silchester-Dorchester-On-Thames-Towcester road and Akeman Street, the Cirencester-St. Albans road. The Silchester road heads South and cuts across the parish after traversing Otmoor.

Little evidence of Roman occupation exists but there is an indication there was a Romano-British camp located close to Brashfield^[25]. Roman coins have been found close to the junction of the Merton-Ambrosden road and the bridleway that comes through Astley Bridge Farm^[20].

Post-Roman

The church is dated to the early 14thc. and is of the Decorated style of English Gothic architecture. Merton village is mentioned in the Domesday book, although the church is not, but there may well be the remnants of an earlier church beneath the building seen today. This, though hidden, may be the only surviving Anglo Saxon structure remaining. As there is the remains of a Knights Templar manor buried behind the church, and the Hospitallers succeeded to the Templar's estates in 1334, it is that military religious order who, most likely, built the church seen today.

In 1152 or 1153, Simon (II) de Senlis, Earl of Huntingdon-Northampton, gave Merton to the Knights Templar and by 1185, the manor covered seven hides. A rental^[23] of 1512 further helps to reconstruct the layout of the ancient village. The street was gated; there were 52 houses, mostly with gardens; there was a cross, no doubt on the green, and a common bake-house nearby, which the villagers had to repair at their own cost with timber supplied by the lord. At that date there was no manor-house, only the close, still known as Court Close, where the Templars', later the Hospitallers', grange had once stood, well to the east end of the village street^[22]. An aerial photograph with a more precise indication of where the grange was is shown in ^[25].



Merton earthworks shown on ^[24]

There is evidence of medieval ridge and furrow ploughing close to The Borrow Pit and behind the church.

A quarry^[21] is shown behind the church on some maps. This is where limestone was dug out of the cornbrash and used to build houses, agricultural buildings and, most likely, the church.



Earthworks behind the church from Google Earth. Note the strip lynchets and the moat.

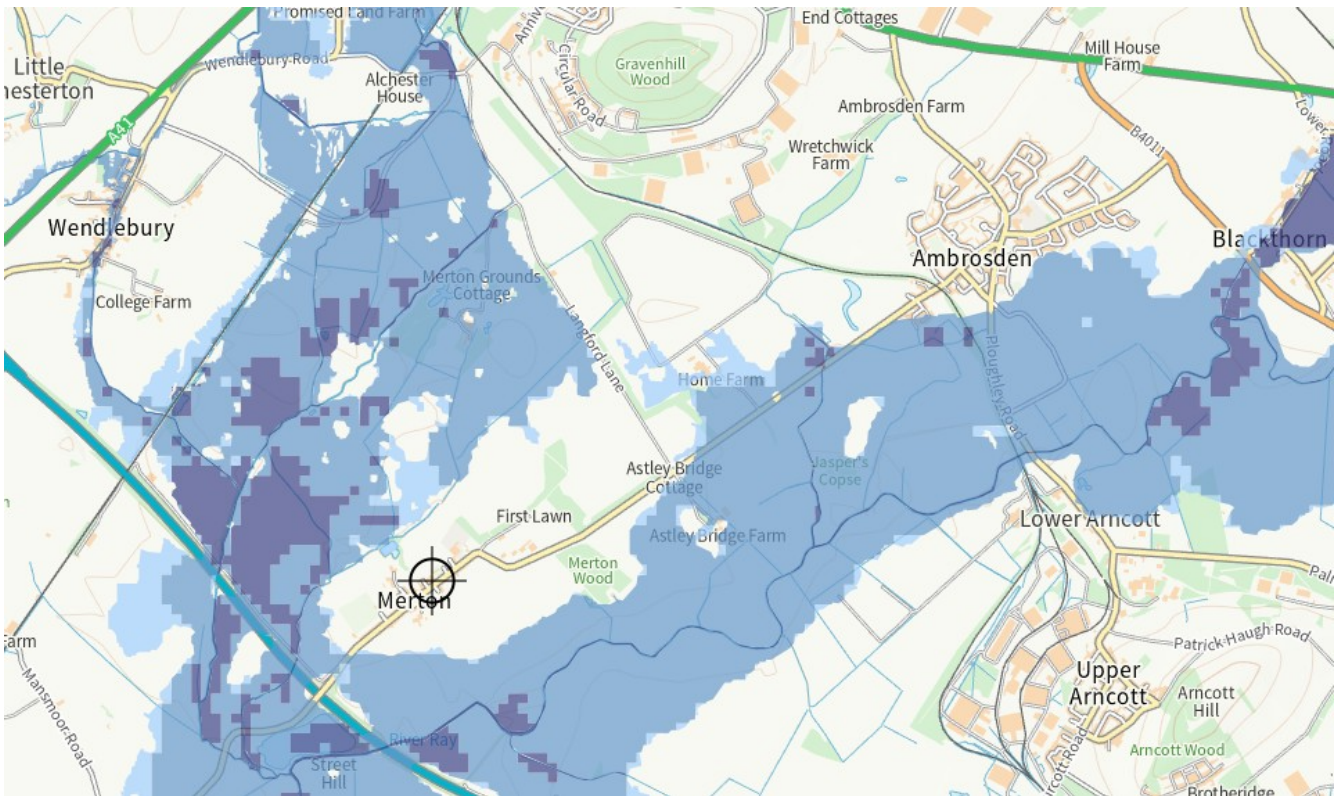


An undated map showing how the village has changed over the years. Of the dates mentioned it possible to say that this was drawn some time after 1960.

Flood risk

The Ray provides the only drainage for the higher ground to the North and East of Otmoor.^[4] As the river passes under the B4027 bridge at Islip, anything that alters the drainage in the catchment area has a knock-on effect at Islip. Note that the River Ray joins Cherwell at Islip, and when the Cherwell is in spate, water flows back up the Ray adding to Islip's flooding problems.

The village is sited at the west end of the parish on one of the dome-shaped outcrops of corn brash which rise out of the Oxford Clay in the neighbourhood^[22]. This has protected the older part of the village from being flooded. Looking at the extent of the flood in the image above, it can be estimated that it follows a contour line between 61m and 62m. The point where the bridleway from Astley Bridge Farm crosses the road to Ambrosden is 62m and the inundation does not quite reach this point. The older part of Merton village lies within the 65m contour, with the lower Southerly part being prone to flooding. There is a 62m spot height in South Western corner of the playing field that seems to be above the flood line, yet the spot height on Street Hill, just South of the Borrow Pit is 61m and is shown as not flooded.



Flooding from the River Ray and surface water



Merton showing the 65m contour^[24]

Given the variation between the limits of the flooding, the contours on the OS map and some variation as to where the water will reach, a safety limit of 63m is prudent.



Floods from the village hall, January 2023

The Environment Agency's flood map shows the village being cut off as the local roads are flooded. However, the bridleway from Astley Bridge Cottage, up to Langford Lane and across to Graven Hill does remain passable. This is the medieval route from the village to the nearest market town, Bicester.

At present, Graven Hill is a military base so, as the army moves away, this footpath needs to be reinstated.

Although not part of the parish, the newest development at Sanderson Park in Ambrosden is between 61m and 62m and puts part of the estate into the potential flood risk area. This was built on what used to be known as Ambrosden Park which had a lake in the middle of it. Whatever drainage and protection has been put in, and it looked to be substantial, will affect Islip.

Land available, subject to the above restrictions

The nearest contour to 63m that is shown on the map is 65m so some estimation is necessary to find 63m. The available area is restricted to the cornbrash mound.

From West End Lane, along the Northern side of the village up to, and including, the Manor House grounds

There is a strip of land behind the village that lies above 63m. This is where the ancient and medieval village was sited, above the areas liable to flood. Before the extensive drainage system was built, floods would have been more common. No building should be allowed here before a comprehensive survey has been undertaken.

As this strip runs past the back of the churchyard, the relevant authorities should be allowed to make comment on the future need for extending the graveyard. The church (1369750) and the remains of the cross (1046547) are listed.

This strip runs through the Manor House grounds. The Manor is grade II listed (1193403).

From the Manor House, along the left hand side of the bridleway that heads past Brashfield

This is part of the fields identified as 112 (Court Close) and 96 (Stone Pit Ground) in the diagram titled Merton Parish Field Names 1930^[26].

Within Court Close is the remains of a Romano-British camp^[25].

Land NE of Brashfield

This is part of the fields identified as 114 (Road Ground, this was allotments) and 115 (First Lawn) in the diagram titled Merton Parish Field Names 1930^[26].

Across the road and up to the Woodland

This is part of the field identified as 118 (Upper Furlong), where it borders Merton Woodland.

Rise up to woodland when heading out of the village

This is part of the field identified as 132a (Kiki's Ploughing).

Land behind The Orchard, along to College Farm

This is the Northern part of the field identified as 131 (Great Ground).

Infill within the village

The village is quite packed together due to the shape and size of the cornbrash mound. However, there are some areas that could be considered for infill housing.

The Eastern end of the Plough car park is used as a parking area for a private dwelling now that the pub has closed.

The field behind Village Hall, which is the Western part of the field identified as 81 (First Wadground). This is used for agricultural purposes at present.

Conclusions

There is a need for a proper survey and investigation of the grange and surroundings in the medieval part of the village. This might be a site of significant historical importance as there is very little that is accessible for investigation at the Temple Cowley Templar Preceptory.

Merton Woodland used to be a sewage farm before being closed and the land was sold to the Parish Council to hold in perpetuity on behalf of the village. This land can be considered to be hazardous until nature has taken its course and cleared any contaminants. It is situated on the field identified as 132c (Old Ploughing).

Any development up-river of Islip could have consequences for that village. The A41 roadworks were extended by four months to put in sufficient water attenuation (surface water held in dedicated pipework and allowed to drain slowly) when it was discovered that run off from the new industrial estate North of Ambrosden would overwhelm the original design. The contractors doing the work stated that they would have liked to have put two larger diameter pipes in but that would have necessitated closing the A41 completely for the duration of the works. This was not allowed by the authorities.

Merton is not a sustainable settlement and was not classed as growth area in the 1996 Local Plan. Although it is not part of the greenbelt, it is next to it and any development could impact that.

Merton suffers from a lack of services, no pub or shop and limited public transport. Any local benefit would be for local landowners and whatever construction teams would be needed. Such employment is not guaranteed to be given to local persons.

The need for additional housing in the local area has been met by the recent new developments around Ambrosden as well as those surrounding Bicester where the Kingsmere site where there were plans for 2,450 homes when the phase 2 proposals were accepted in 2017.

References

- [1] Yellow Maps, *Around & About Bicester* (© 2019 Ordnance Survey)
- [2] Ordnance Survey OS Explorer 180, *Oxford, Witney & Woodstock*. ISBN 978-0-31924373-2 (© Crown Copyright 2015). upon purchase of an OS paper map, there is a facility to download a free digital copy to either an Android or an Apple device. This gives
- [3] Map screencapped on 25/7/2022 from omisweb.co.uk/reports/localarea?compare=E04008061

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- [5] archiuk.com
- [6] Yellow Maps, *Around & About Beckley, Islip, Otmoor Nature Reserve* (© 2019 Ordnance Survey)
- [7] Bradley, P. & Parsons, M., *The excavation of two barrows at Merton, Oxfordshire.* From *Oxoniensia*, Vol. LXII, 1997.
- [8] Major, Dr. H.D.A., *St. Swithun's Church, Merton.* Private publication.
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- [10] check-long-term-flood-risk.service.gov.uk/ provides information on flood risk from surface water and from rivers.
- [11] cherwell.gov.uk/NeighbourhoodPlans
- [12] The Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012
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- [15] rspb.org.uk/reserves-and-events/reserves-a-z/otmoor
- [16] goingbirding.co.uk/oxon/sitedetails.asp?site_id=945
- [17] www.gov.uk/guidance/great-crested-newts-protection-surveys-and-licences
- [18] George Lambrick & Andrew Parkinson *Merton Borrow Pit archaeological assessment February 1990*
- [19] Alchester is the modern name as the site is not include in any ancient references.
- [20] Details are shown on the Land Registry plan in the sale of West End Farm in 1965.
- [21] From a plan dated 28/11/1930, from a document archive relating to the sale of West End Farm in 1965.
- [22] Victoria County History (VCH), *A History Of The County Of Oxford*, volume 5, Bullingden Hundred.
- [23] Bodl. MS. C.C.C. c 320, ff. 15 sqq.
- [24] OS Sheet SP 51 NE, 1 : 10 000, 1981, Crown Copyright
- [25] David R. Green *In The Wake Of Ambrosius*, figure 7, page 65.
- [26] Jill L. Wishart *Merton Parish 1880 - 1980*

Version history

Version number	Date	Comments
1	02/01/23	Initial draft
2	14/05/23	Updated with images and sent out for comments