

Marlborough Area Neighbourhood Plan

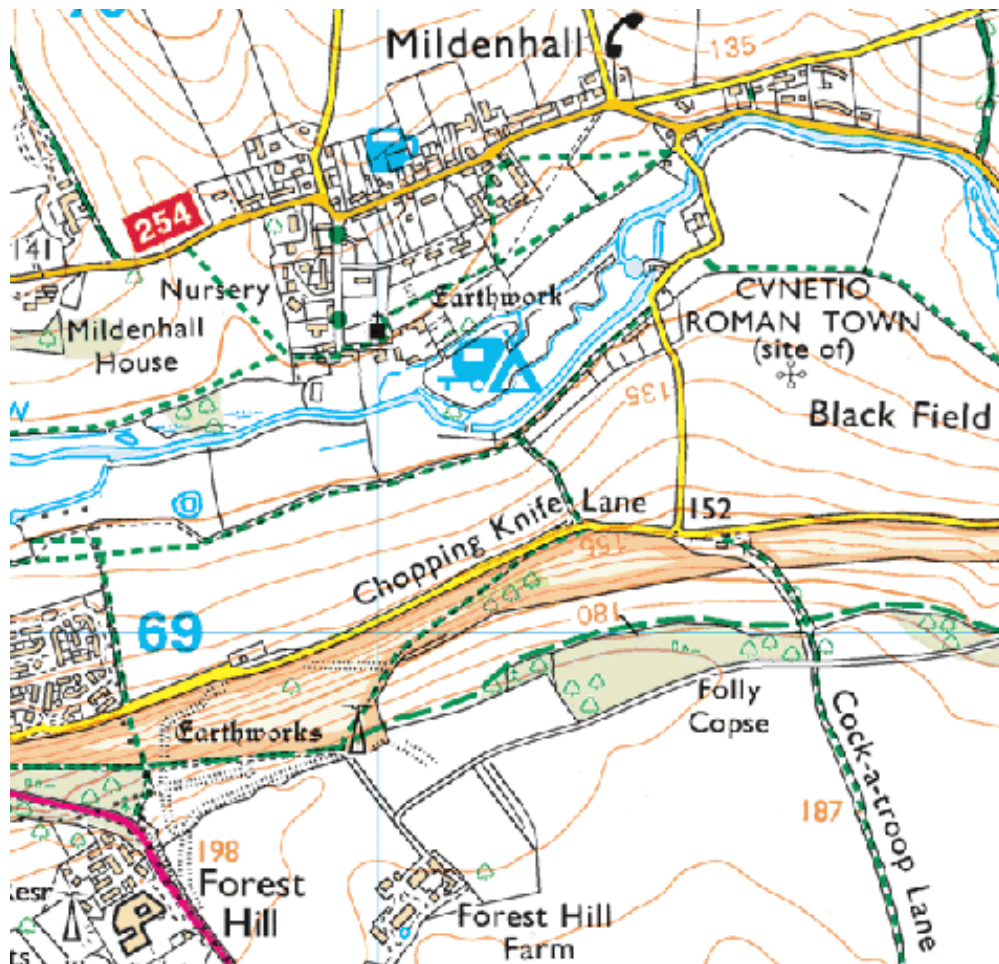
MARL17 – Conserving the Scenic Beauty of the AONB

Chopping Knife Lane

In 2018 the Marlborough Area Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group's 'call for land' resulted in land being offered for future development. The Crown Estate offered MANP two pieces of land for residential development. One situated to the north of St John's Park and the other to its east. This report is concerned specifically with land to the east of St John's Park and which lies immediately south of Chopping Knife Lane. In this report this land is referred to as Chopping Knife Lane.

This report emphasises the reasons why this land should not be developed.

As with all the land that surrounds the MANP area of Marlborough, Manton, Savernake and Mildenhall (known locally as Minal), Chopping Knife Lane is in the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Nature Beauty. The views, from both the north and south, looking down and along the valley where this site is situated, show the village of Mildenhall nestling into the valley of the River Kennet and a landscape that is rural in nature with typical Wiltshire landscape characteristics of open downlands, woods and river valley. This area is rich in historic sites of national importance that testify to the importance of the area in the Iron Age and Roman periods.



Chopping Knife Lane is adjacent to St John's Park which was built on the site of St John's School's former Lower School buildings. That site was sold to provide some of the funding for the new school built at Granham Hill. The school playing fields on the eastern side were deemed to be a brown field site. This allowed the built environment to project out into a beautiful, unspoilt valley which sits between a section of the Pantawick to Stitchcombe escarpment to the south and the River Kennet Valley to the north.

The AECOM Assessment (commissioned for MANP) reporting on housing sites for allocation through the MANP states that:

- the Chopping Knife Lane site is within 60 metres of the River Kennet Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)
- next to the County Wildlife Sites (CWSs) to the north and south
- the site is within a SSSI Impact Risk Zone (IRZ) for residential development which may lead to adverse effects on the designated biodiversity sites
- it is a greenfield site
- trees and hedgerows along the site boundaries hold biodiversity of value
- a Priority Habitat Deciduous Woodland is situated 120 metres south of the site
- the site forms part of the Kennet Valley Landscape Character Area and the River Kennet

The report also states:

The site is a large open field located beyond the settlement boundary, bound to the west only by existing residential development. Development would therefore result in substantial expansion of the settlement into the open countryside, impacting upon the wider characteristics of the AONB.

A preliminary Landscape Sensitivity Assessment (2012) has been carried out for all Wiltshire Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) sites with the AONB. The Assessment states that 'the site is highly visible, in particular from the downland to the south and east and also from the northern side of the river valley'. Development would therefore be 'highly visible, having substantial impact on the character and quality of these views'.

The assessment concludes that 'development would be detrimental to special qualities and natural beauty of the AONB and should not be taken forward as part of the SHLAA'.

This area is of considerable historic value both nationally and locally. To the east of the field containing the site, on the edge of the village of Minal, is the protected site of 'Blackfield' in which lies the Scheduled Monument Cunetio, a Roman fortress and small town. The most recent archaeological investigations also identified that the west wall of the fortress lies in the field to the west of Cock a Troop Lane, at the eastern edge of the field in which the site is located. To the south of the site on the north facing escarpment are the substantial earthwork remains of the Iron Age *oppidum* (proto town) at Forest Hill, also a Scheduled Monument.

The Wiltshire Core Strategy, Policy 51, states that:

There is a need to protect the distinct character and identity of the villages and settlements in Wiltshire' and 'Developments on the edge of towns and villages will be broadly controlled in line with Core Policy (Delivery Strategy). However, the principal pressure on the landscape arising from new development is erosion of the separate identity, character, visual and functional amenity of settlements and their setting and impacts on the open countryside'.

The Chopping Knife Lane site is in the parish of Mildenhall and abuts the boundary with Marlborough. Any development on this site will set a precedent and not only will the outstanding valley be lost but the unique identity of the small village of Mildenhall will be lost too. Once development begins in this area it is likely to be the beginning of a cumulative development of a number of possible sites for housing.

In the Wiltshire Council Strategic Environment Assessment for the Marlborough Area Neighbourhood Plan (2019) it is stated that the plan could have:

- a significant amount of development within the AONB the effects of which could be considered likely to be long-term and irreversible
- cumulative effects are considered likely to be significant.... and biodiversity, landscape and heritage assets are considered most likely to be affected.

It is obvious that any further development in this area will result in the encroachment of the built environment of Marlborough on the small village of Mildenhall.

If the site were to be developed for housing it would be easy for the Marlborough settlement boundary to be moved to accommodate its inclusion. This would produce homes that are built too far away from the services and amenities of Marlborough for pedestrian access, resulting in reliance on the car for transport and thereby exacerbating the existing air quality problem within the town. The evidence within the previously mentioned AECOM Assessment highlights that building on the Chopping Knife Lane site will produce a development that is inappropriately positioned as:

- the site is too distant from the services and facilities focused in the centre of the town, including the medical facilities that are approximately 1.4 km from the site
- the site has poor access to schools being over 1.1 km from the nearest primary school and 1.6 km from the secondary school
- the site is 1.3 km from the Marlborough Recreation Ground which includes the skate park
- the town's Leisure Centre and Swimming Pool (and Marlborough College sporting and other facilities that are made available to community groups) are at the western end of the town and 2.6 km away.

The Common, to the north of the town, provides facilities for a wide range of sporting and recreational Activities. Marlborough Rugby Club and Marlborough Youth Football Club (MYFC) have playing pitches here for a wide range of age groups. Other sporting and recreation opportunities include the golf and tennis clubs. Park runs take place here on a regular basis and it is a popular area

for dog walking and model aeroplane flying. There is also a small play area for children. The Common is 3 km from the site.

The village of Mildenhall, to the east of the site, has a cricket/football pitch which is well used by MYFC and Marlborough Cricket Club and this recreational facility is 1.75 km from the site. Marlborough Cricket Club's Ground and Club House is on the edge of the Savernake Estate near to the hospital and is 1.75 km from the site. Although both these recreational facilities are closer in distance to the site than those located in the west of the town it is unlikely that either would be accessed on foot because, from the site the cricket ground involves a steep climb and a dangerous crossing over the A4 and the Mildenhall sports field would be accessed either by unpaved and narrow lanes or an alternative route which includes a right of way footpath across a field.

A major issue of the development of this site is one of accessibility during development and for potential residents. It can only be accessed from Chopping Knife Lane which is a single vehicle track bounded on the south side by the Chopping Knife Lane Bank County Wildlife Site and by mature hedgerows on the north side which are valuable and ecologically sensitive areas. The Lane is also a frequently used route into the wider countryside for cyclists, runners and walkers as the narrow lane naturally slows down any traffic that uses what was originally a cart track.

In conclusion, this report highlights the importance of protecting this much valued area of outstanding scenic landscape that includes sensitive ecological and bio-diverse environments and nationally important historical sites. It is also important to maintain the distinct characters of the historic and busy market town of Marlborough with its larger housing developments, business centre and main transport routes and the small village of Mildenhall with its modest areas of residential development sprinkled with thatched cottages, bungalows and larger rural houses and its own distinct village identity.