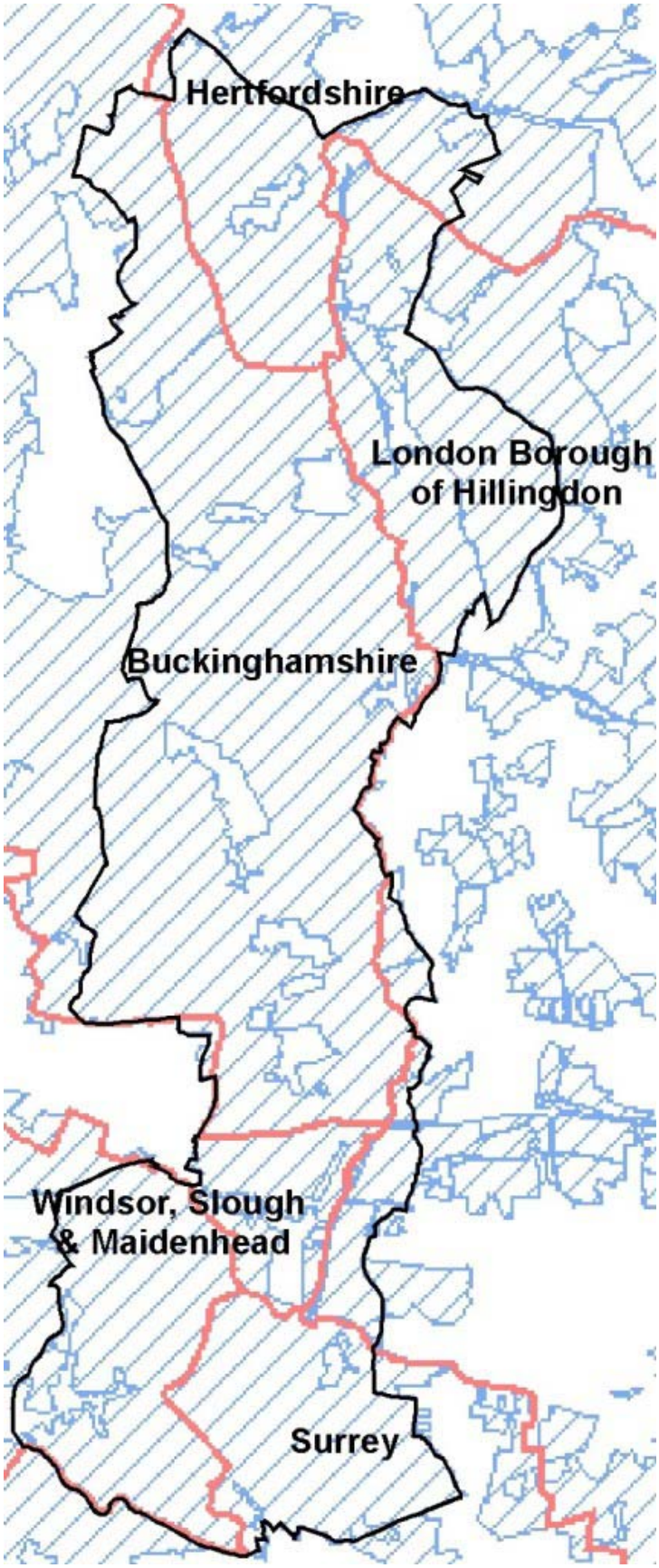
2. The Colne Valley Park

2.1. The Colne Valley Park: An Introduction

Figure 4: Extent of the Metropolitan Green Belt in the Colne Valley Park (Image from Magic)

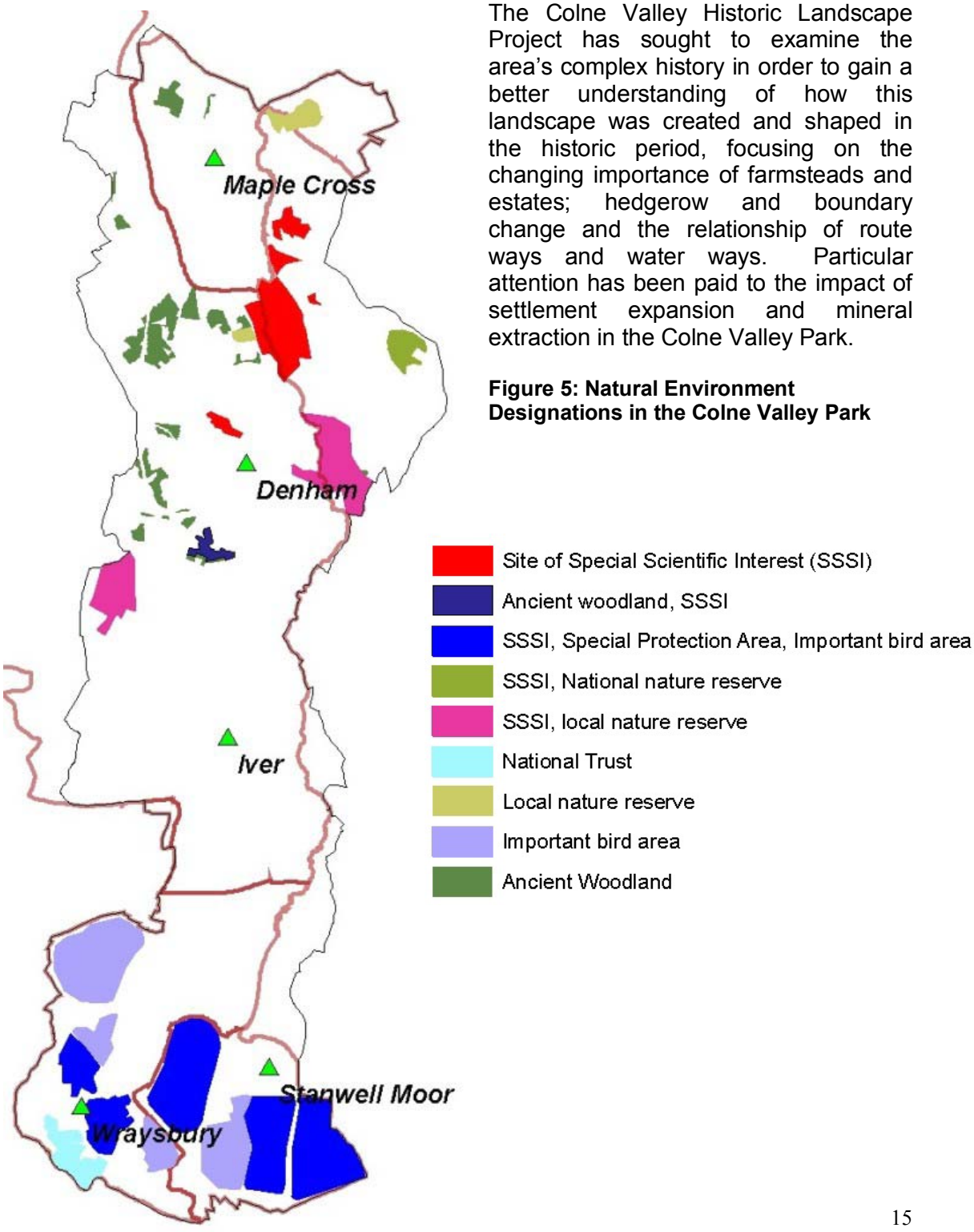


The Colne Valley Regional Park is an area of land surrounding the River Colne situated to the west of London. It spans the boundaries of three counties, Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire and Surrey, plus Slough and Windsor & Maidenhead in the former county of Berkshire and the London borough of Hillingdon. The Colne Valley Park has approximately 45,000 inhabitants but has in its catchment total in excess of three million.

The Colne Valley Park shows a rich diversity of historic landscape spanning some 200 years of rapid urban growth and landscape change with significant elements surviving from earlier landscapes and a rich archaeological heritage stretching back to some of the earliest modern human inhabitants of Britain. Historically the Colne Valley had been an essentially agricultural landscape from prehistoric times until the late 19th century. Industrialisation began slowly in the late 18th century with the construction of the Grand Junction Canal and accelerated from the mid 19th century. This process led to extensive management of the rivers, the construction of canals and railways, the expansion of historic settlements. The demand for raw materials also added to the pressures of modernisation, as the river gravels common throughout the valley became an increasingly valuable asset.

The early 20th century saw further change in the wake of increased demand for housing leading to the creation of suburban settlements,

only to be halted in the late 1950s by the establishment of the Metropolitan green belt (Figure 4). Nevertheless the valley has continued to experience pressure for mineral extraction and transport infrastructure, of which the M25 and the nearby Heathrow Airport are the most obvious examples. At the same time there has been a decline in the viability of traditional agricultural land management whilst some sites have developed into valued recreational facilities. With the establishment of the Colne Valley Partnership in the mid 1960's, there has been a valley-wide emphasis on protecting the environment and enhancing its recreational value. The Partnership plays an increasingly active role in the management of the Park and in promoting the available leisure facilities. Figure 5 illustrates some of the natural environment designations in the Park, with several areas being protected by more than one designation.



The Colne Valley Historic Landscape Project has sought to examine the area's complex history in order to gain a better understanding of how this landscape was created and shaped in the historic period, focusing on the changing importance of farmsteads and estates; hedgerow and boundary change and the relationship of route ways and water ways. Particular attention has been paid to the impact of settlement expansion and mineral extraction in the Colne Valley Park.

Figure 5: Natural Environment Designations in the Colne Valley Park

2.2. Geological Background

Figure 6: Bedrock geology of the Colne Valley Park

Bedrock geology lies in successive formations of consolidated rocks on a roughly southwest-northeast alignment across the country with the oldest bedrock in northern Britain, to the south where the London Clay deposits is one of the youngest. The bedrock geology (Figure 6) is fairly uniform throughout the Colne Valley Park. The oldest formations of Upper Cretaceous chalk (99-66 Ma) date to the late Mesozoic Era (251-66 Ma). This formation lies in the north around Maple Cross and reaches as far south as Denham (BRG: 1960) and roughly co-relates with the higher ridges in the Park.

Moving further south the bedrock deposits shift to mudstone deposits dating to the present Cenozoic Era (66 Ma-present). Lambeth Clay mudstone immediately surrounds the chalk ridges and dates to the start of the inter-glacial Palaeocene, the first epoch of the Cenozoic (BRG: 1960). The remainder of the bedrock geology consists of the youngest formations of London Clay mudstone dating to the glacial Eocene epoch (55-33 Ma). For the most part, younger superficial deposits cover bedrock geology, however some areas of bedrock do remain on the surface, in particular around Harefield and Maple Cross. The bedrock geology remains undisturbed by modern development.

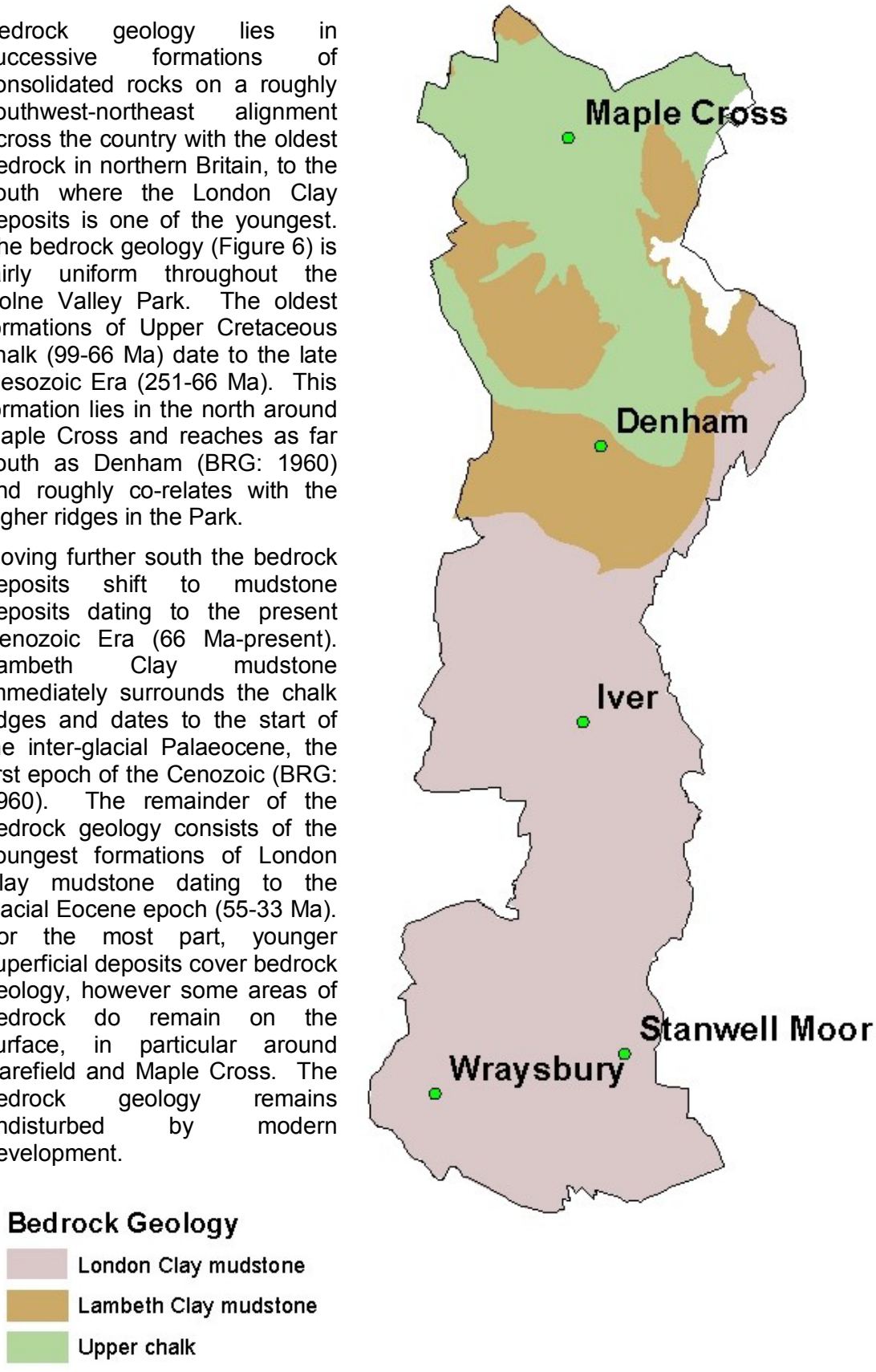
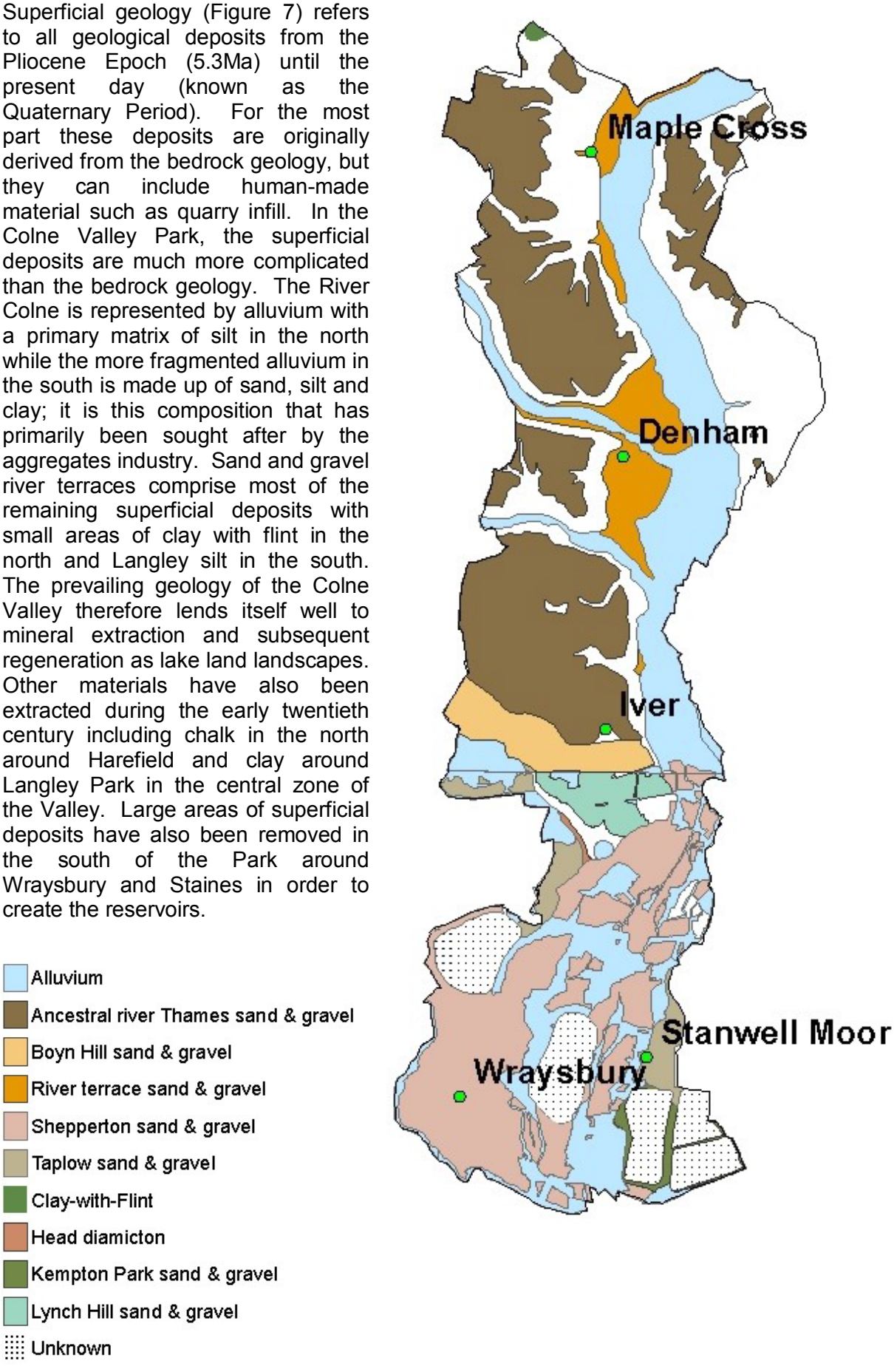


Figure 7: Superficial Geology of the Colne Valley Park

Superficial geology (Figure 7) refers to all geological deposits from the Pliocene Epoch (5.3Ma) until the present day (known as the Quaternary Period). For the most part these deposits are originally derived from the bedrock geology, but they can include human-made material such as quarry infill. In the Colne Valley Park, the superficial deposits are much more complicated than the bedrock geology. The River Colne is represented by alluvium with a primary matrix of silt in the north while the more fragmented alluvium in the south is made up of sand, silt and clay; it is this composition that has primarily been sought after by the aggregates industry. Sand and gravel river terraces comprise most of the remaining superficial deposits with small areas of clay with flint in the north and Langley silt in the south. The prevailing geology of the Colne Valley therefore lends itself well to mineral extraction and subsequent regeneration as lake land landscapes. Other materials have also been extracted during the early twentieth century including chalk in the north around Harefield and clay around Langley Park in the central zone of the Valley. Large areas of superficial deposits have also been removed in the south of the Park around Wraysbury and Staines in order to create the reservoirs.



2.3 Archaeology of the Colne Valley Park

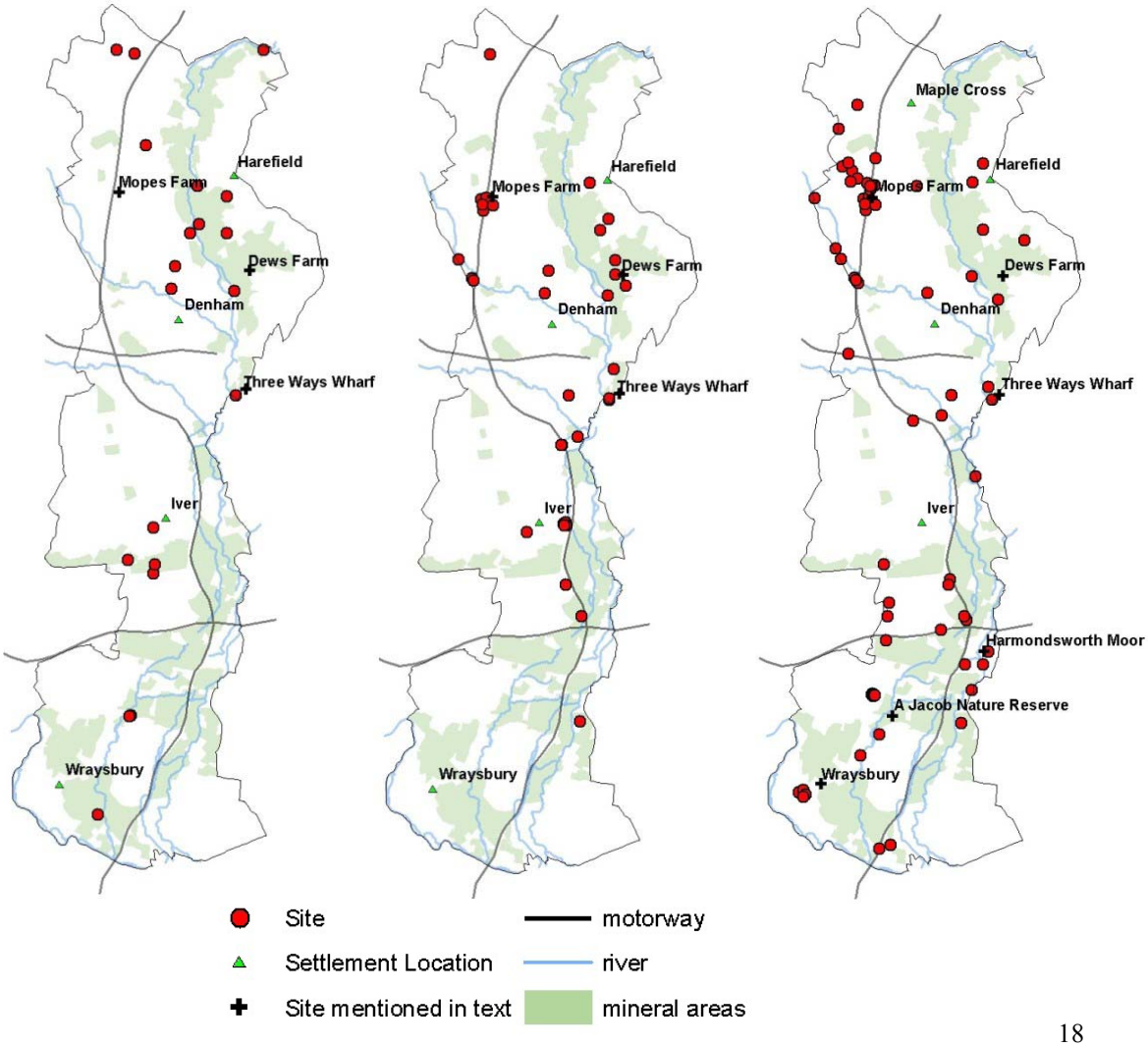
A period by period summary of the existing state of knowledge for the Colne Valley Park is set out in appendix one. This section provides an introductory overview.

Palaeolithic to Neolithic periods (700,000-2300 BC)

Motorway construction and the aggregates industry have provided a great deal of evidence for these earlier prehistoric periods in areas of the Colne Valley Park where archaeological work might not otherwise have been undertaken. Figure 8 illustrates the distribution of sites and finds in the Park along with the river channels in order to show the relationship with the vital river systems. This data helps indicate the high archaeological potential of the Park for these early prehistoric periods. There are nationally important sites within and surrounding the Park. The Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods are well represented in the Park, in particular on the floor of the Colne Valley in the Denham/Uxbridge area where sites have been preserved undisturbed beneath later peat and alluvium. The Upper Palaeolithic/Mesolithic site at Three Ways Wharf on the boundary of the Colne Valley Park near Uxbridge is the best known exemplar of this nationally significant concentration of key sites. In the Neolithic period several important sites have been recorded including the Stanwell Cursus at Heathrow and a causewayed enclosure at Wraysbury. The archaeological resource for the earlier prehistoric periods is thus of national significance with high research potential.

Figure 8: HER/SMR data Palaeolithic - Neolithic

a) Palaeolithic (400,00-8500 BC). b) Mesolithic (8500-4500 BC). c) Neolithic (4500-2300 BC).

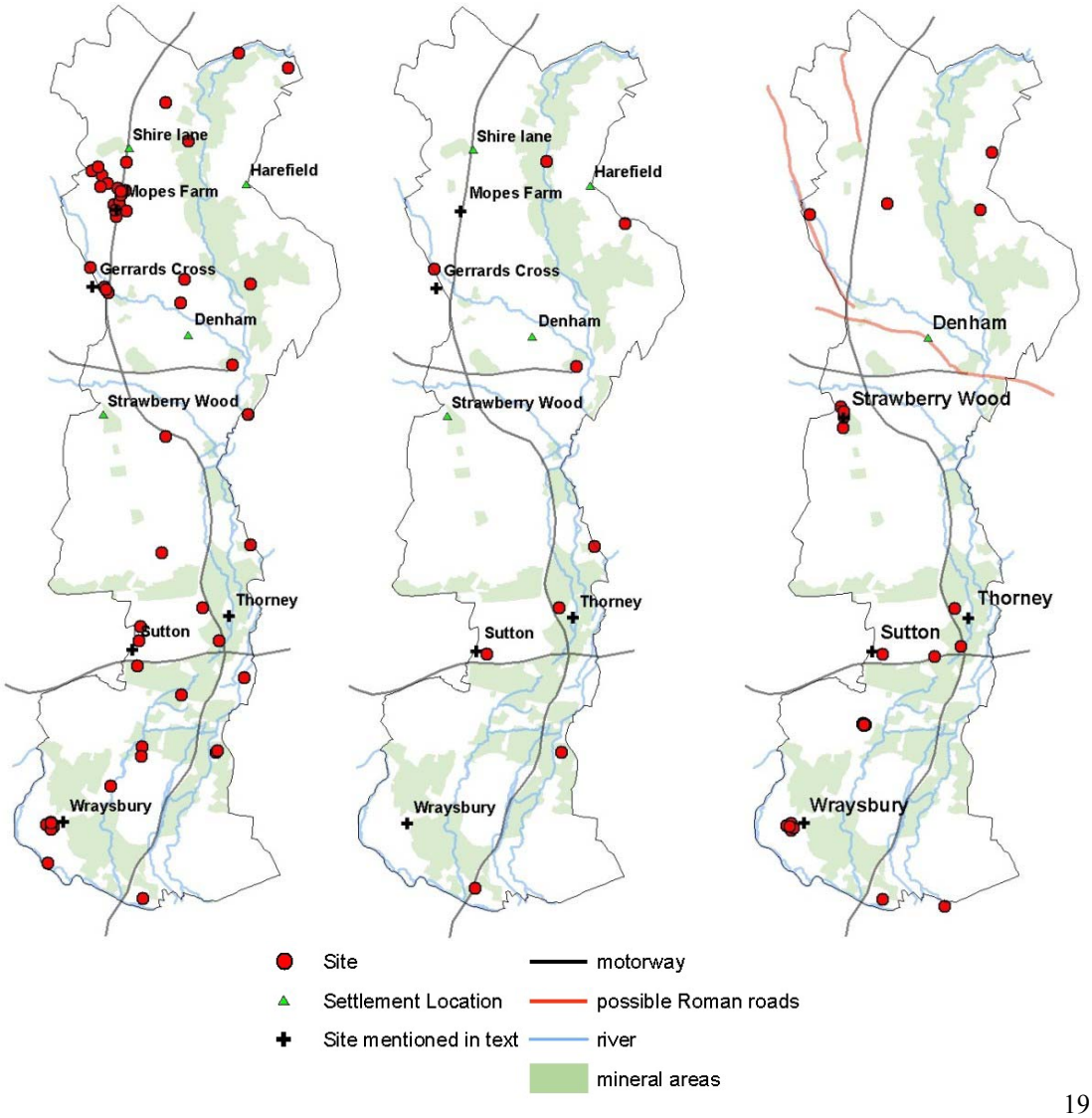


Bronze Age to Romano British periods (2300 BC- AD 410)

The Bronze Age sees evidence for further settlement activity and the first laying out of extensive field systems . An exceptional high status site has been excavated at Runnymede Bridge whilst burial sites may be indicated by ring ditches. An isolated cremation site near Gerrards Cross has been recorded with a second funeral site west of the Lea, Denham as well as numerous flint scatters. Evidence becomes rather more scarce during the Iron Age and primarily comprises a few isolated find spots and probable occupation sites, although just to the east of the Park at Heathrow there is evidence of continued settlement together with a defensive and ritual site. The Roman period sees an expansion in evidence for settlement, re-organisation of field systems and introduction of foreign burial practices. As yet no villas have been recognised and it seems likely that the area's location in the hinterland of Londinium and a small town established at Staines may be significant in understanding land use. Whilst the study area's prominence in earlier prehistory appears to carry forward into the late Bronze Age it drops away in the Iron Age when the Lower Colne Valley provides less evidence than comparable areas further upstream along the Thames or northwards in the Chilterns and beyond. The reasons for this apparent change are not yet clear. There seems to be some resurgence in the Roman period.

Figure 9: HER/SMR data Bronze Age- Roman

a) Bronze Age (2300-700 BC) b) Iron Age (700 BC – 43AD) c) Roman (43-400 AD)



Saxon to Modern Period (300 AD- present day)

The Saxon period is not very well represented in the Colne Valley Park, due to a general sparsity of recognised physical remains for this period (Figure 10). However written evidence, particularly from religious institutions does provide some extra background. Continuous patterns of settlement begin to emerge at Iver during the Saxon period while evidence for settlement at Wraysbury dates back even further to Neolithic times. The medieval period, dating from the 11th-16th century, sees a significant leap in archaeological data for the Park including numerous records relating in particular to manors and historic parkland such as at Langley Park. Several kiln sites dating to the 11th century are also recorded at Alderbourne Manor. Domesday indicates early use of the rivers with several mills already in existence as well as numerous fish ponds such as at Ankerwycke Priory. Industrialisation arrived relatively late in the Colne Valley Park despite construction of the Grand Junction Canal in the late 18th century and did not have a significant impact until the late 19th and early 20th century. There is considerable, but still largely unrealised, potential for research into the medieval and early modern periods, especially into the effects of the growth of London and the influence of the Royal Court at Windsor.

Figure 10: HER/SMR data Saxon - Present day

a) Saxon (400-1066) b) Medieval (1066-1700) c) Modern (1700-present)