# 3.0 Understanding the Evolution of West Bletchley

3.1   Introduction

An understanding of the history of a place allows a greater appreciation and enjoyment of its character and identity. Much of what we see today in West Bletchley derives from the post-war pre and post new town expansion of Bletchley. However, this belies a much older settlement history of the area dating back to Roman and Medieval settlements and pre-war expansion. In this section, we briefly chart the historical growth of West Bletchley and identify the key periods of change. This isn't a comprehensive history of the area, that can be found elsewhere, but concentrates on the key periods and plans that led to significant growth of the area. Figure 12 summarises the main periods of growth.
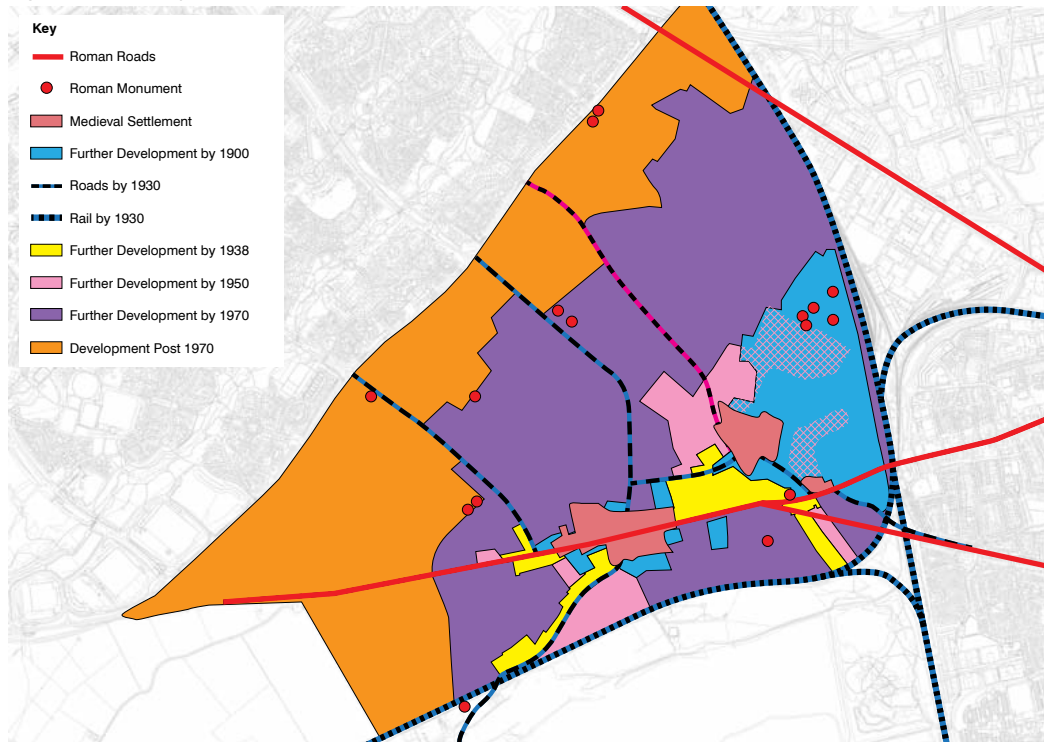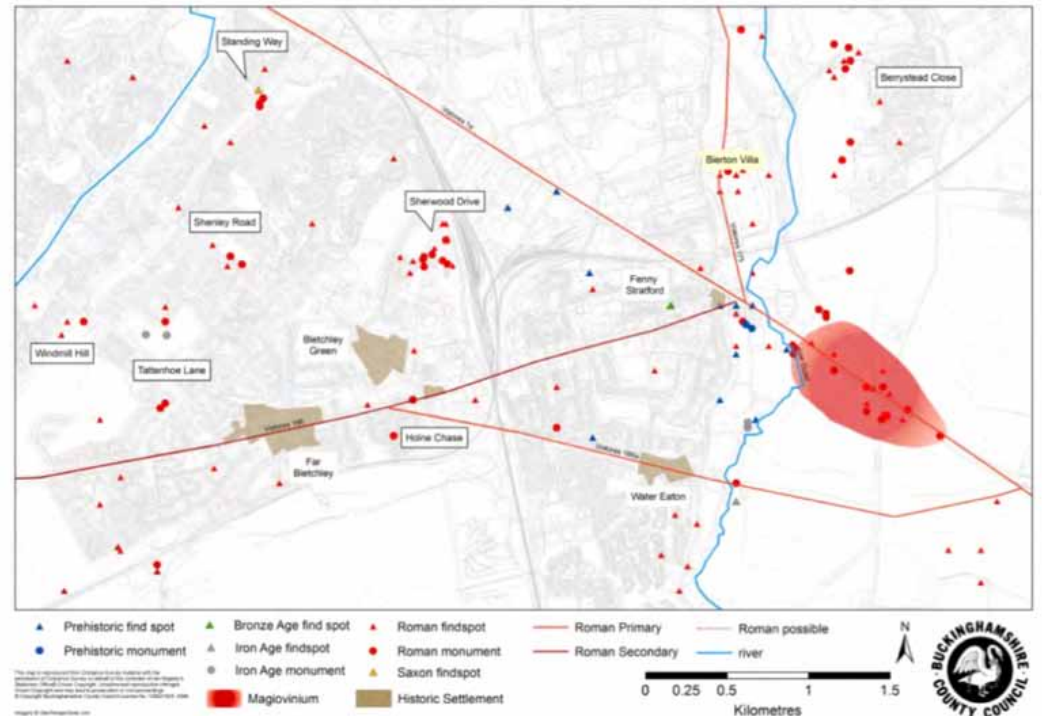
3.2   Early Settlement

The south Midlands area was settled from the Neolithic period onwards, with the gradual introduction of a more sedentary lifestyle, based on the rearing of domestic animals and the cultivation of early forms of cereals. Before the Bronze Age, settlement was primarily located close to rivers. Within the West Bletchley area a few isolated flints have been found of Bronze Age date, but no evidence of prehistoric settlement. The surrounding area however is notable for the number and distribution of Iron Age sites, so was becoming well-settled before the Roman invasion.

The Romans moved through the area from 55BC onwards. They established towns and built roads between them. One of the major routes was Watling Street, that runs across the north of West Bletchley (as the 'old A5') it has earlier origins as an ancient trackway, but when paved became one of the most important Roman routes for the movement of armies, trade and people. The sizeable town of 'Magiovinium' was established to the south of where Watling Street crosses the Ouzel - to the south of today's Fenny Stratford.

Another known Roman route of a lesser stature connected Watling Street to the Roman temple complex at Thornborough. This route is on the present alignment of the B4034 Buckingham Road through West Bletchley. The route joined the Roman road from Towcester (Lactodorum) to Alchester in Oxfordshire. There have been a number of Roman sites discovered within the parish. Several are associated with small farmsteads with evidence of grain-drying kilns suggesting this was a reasonably productive arable area during that period.

Figure 13 reproduces the plan by Buckinghamshire County Council illustrating the evidence for early settlement in the area.

Figure 12: Summary of Urban Growth

Key
- Roman Roads
- Roman Monument
- Medieval Settlement
- Further Development by 1900
- Roads by 1930
- Rail by 1930
- Further Development by 1938
- Further Development by 1950
- Further Development by 1970
- Development Post 1970

Figure 13: Early Settlement

3.3   Medieval Settlement to 1800

The Domesday survey records no major settlements in today's West Bletchley. The survey only refers to 'Etone', located north of Water Eaton Mill close to the River Ouzel. It has been suggested that the fairly high population recorded may reflect that several small dispersed settlements existed, which later became West or Far Bletchley, Bletchley Church and Water Eaton.

During the medieval period, Fenny Stratford adjacent to Watling Street was the major settlement and had a market charter in 1204 and a fair charter in 1252. The market faired well throughout the medieval period until the Civil War led to it being discontinued in1642.

The character of West Bletchley at this time is more difficult to establish. It consisted of the two small hamlets of Old Bletchley and Far Bletchley. Old Bletchley was a small settlement with a cluster of houses, around a central green adjacent to the Church. The Church was built in the 12th Century, and there is the first reference to a park nearby in the 14th Century.

Far Bletchley, further along the Buckingham Road at the junction with Shenley Road also comprised a small cluster of farms around the junction although it had no church or manor.

It seems that the settlements changed little in the post medieval period. It is likely that the failing market at Fenny Stratford halted settlement expansion and there is a little evidence of expansion along the Buckingham Road at that time. It is clear that the road running north to Shenley is a historic route of at least medieval origin and it also seems likely that Tattenhoe Lane was established by the end of the medieval period as well.

Figure 14 - The Saxton Atlas of England of 1579. Bletchley can be seen at the bottom right.

3.4   Early Industrialisation

The Grand Union Canal (originally the Grand Junction Canal) opened in 1800 to the east of the parish to provide a canal link between London and Birmingham. This brought a significant new trade route through the area. It was closely followed in 1838 by the London to Birmingham railway with the line passing between Fenny Stratford and Bletchley, immediately east of Bletchley Park. Within 8 years a branch line was built to Bedford and subsequently extended to Cambridge, and by 1851 branch lines to Banbury and Oxford were opened, with Bletchley becoming an important junction.

With the railways, large scale industrial brickmaking became possible and large operations became established to the south of the town. Until this time, small brickyards had made hand- made bricks using the canal to transport them or for local use. Bletchley became nationally significant for its brick making.

As industrialization progressed, housing was developed, although most was to the east of the main north-south railway in what is now Central Bletchley. The impact to the historic settlements of Old Bletchley and Far Bletchley appears minimal with a few short terraces of red brick housing.

Figure 15 is The first series OS map of 1885 and shows small areas of new housing from this time. It is evident that by this time Shenley Road, Tattenhoe Lane and Rickley Lane were well established routes.

Figure 14: Saxton Atlas

Figure 15: 1885 OS Map

3.5   Bletchley Park and Early Planned Expansion

The West Bletchley we see today largely reflects the significant expansion during the 20th century as a result of various phases of planned development, mostly between the 1930s and 1970s. The vision to promote and expand Bletchley however, started earlier in the century.

At the beginning of the century the greatest changes were associated with Bletchley Park. In 1883 Herbert Samuel Leon, a wealthy London financier, had bought the estate of 581 acres and expanded the existing farmhouse into a large rambling house combining Victorian Gothic, Tudor and Dutch Baroque styles. He also created large gardens with woodlands, avenues, a small lake and a cricket pitch with an ornate pavilion. In the early years of the 20th century, prior to the First World War around a hundred staff were employed to work in the house, gardens and farm. The Leon's entertained extensively and provided accommodation for their staff. The 1900 OS map Figure 16 shows the estate as it was then with the cricket pitch and pavilion on the southern boundary. There is also an avenue across the estate to walk from the house to the station.

The Leon's were keen to improve the surrounding area and to provide better accommodation for local people. Sir Leon was a Liberal MP for the constituency from 1892 to 1895. He served as High Sheriff of Buckinghamshire in 1909 and was created a Baronet in 1911. Over the years he donated significant amounts of land to the parish for public and educational use including Leon Recreation Ground and the land for what is now Sir Herbert Leon Academy. In 1911 Sir Leon offered 93 building plots for sale adjoining the recreation ground but only 10 were sold. The unsold plots were turned into allotments during the First World War. Every year the Leon's opened their grounds for the annual Bletchley show, which had up to 15,000 visitors. Many county cricket matches were also held at the ground.

Sir Leon died in 1926 and his wife, Lady Leon, continued to live at the park until her death in 1937. She was also a very active member of the local community and became a member of Bletchley Urban District Council. She persuaded the council in 1930 that as Bletchley was the railway, postal and shopping centre for quite a large district, it should be expanded to include surrounding parishes. The Council agreed and asked the rather surprised County Council to approve.

However, opposition from the surrounding parishes led to only Water Eaton being included. This however, did mean that in 1934 Bletchley UDC was increased by 1,000 acres and an additional 300 residents. The idea to expand the town took root and was soon being campaigned for by the Bletchley Gazette under the title "A Bigger, Better, Brighter, Bletchley."

The advantages and potential of the location led to the Buckinghamshire Regional Planning Report (c 1935) to describe the area as the 'most eminently suitable for industrial development in Mid-North Buckinghamshire'.

The OS Map with 1938 additions Figure 17 shows that prior to the Second World War there was already significant new areas of housing under construction.

After the death of Lady Leon in 1937, Bletchley Park mansion and much of the estate was bought by a local developer, Herbert Faulkner who built Wilton Avenue and was proposing to build more housing.

However, in May 1938, he sold the mansion and 58 acres of land to Admiral Sir Hugh Sinclair, head of the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6). He bought the estate with his own money after the Government said they had no budget to do so. The advantages of the location and its transport links were obvious to him. At that time, Watling Street also remained the main vehicle route between the north and south of the county.

During the War, Bletchley Park became the top-secret home of Government Code and Cypher School. The code breaking carried out there had a significant impact on the outcome of the war. To accommodate the 10,000 personnel required extensive new building across the park and the area was completely transformed, mainly by the construction of numerous wooden huts to provide workspace.
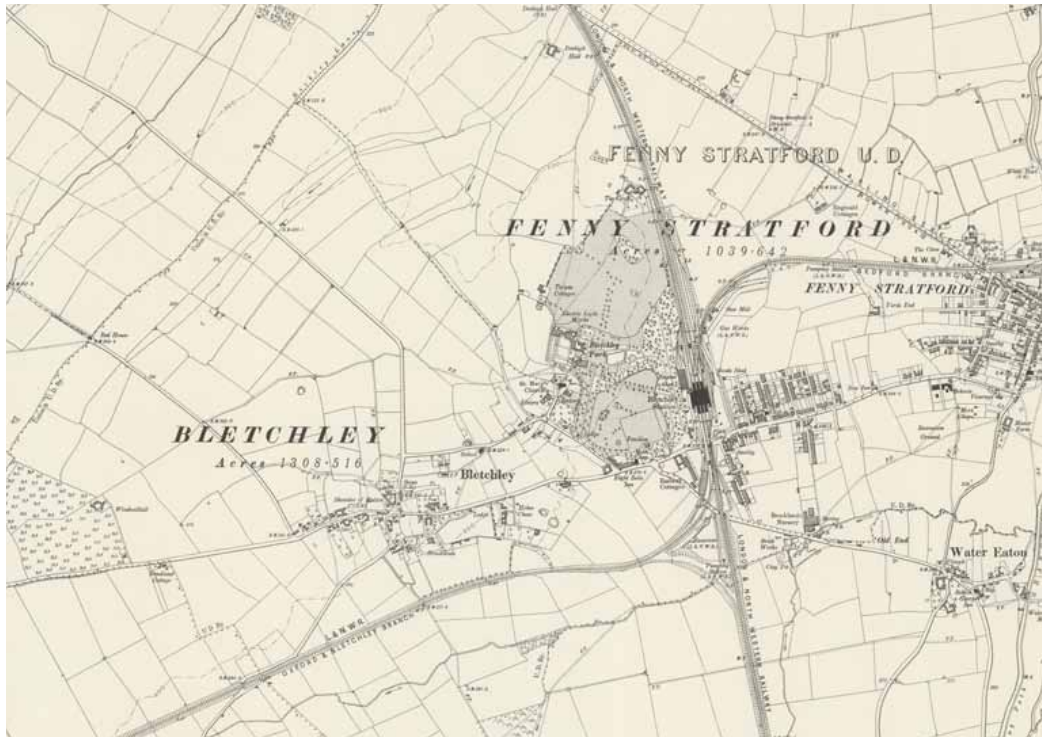
Figure 16: 1900 OS Map

Figure 17: 1938 OS Map

3.6 Post-War Planned Expansion

Figure 18 is the 1945 OS map that clearly shows the extent of the transformation, although the house, gardens and pond are retained along with the cricket pitch and pavilion. The huts can be seen to spread west over what is now Rickley Park.

During the war, Bletchley was visited by Professor Abercrombie who was consultant to London County Council for the rebuilding and planning of London. He met with Bletchley UDC clerk and councilors. When he produced his "Greater London Plan" in 1944, he re-iterated the suitability of Bletchley for expansion to re-house parts of overcrowded and war damaged London. The UDC responded and commenced residential development in anticipation of the Town Development Act 1952, but it was not until 1954 that a formal agreement was reached between Government, Bletchley UDC and London County Council to re-house Londoners at Bletchley.

In 1954, Buckinghamshire County Council published the Bletchley Town Map and Development Plan, which identified land for new housing and industry to grow the town by 9,000 people. The Town Map identified the north west (West Bletchley) for housing and the north east for industry. The new areas of residential development would be served by Buckingham Road and two new roads, forming a triangle with its apex at the White Spire School, now known as Rickley Lane and the southern part of Whaddon Way. A further route was planned from Buckingham Road to Newton Longville across the railway, but was never built.

Reviews of the Town Map in 1958 allocated further areas for housing served by expansion of Whaddon Way northwards to Watling Street for an additional 4,800 people, and further amendments from 1958 to 1966 proposed additional expansion at West Bletchley and Water Eaton, including the Lakes Estate, identifying an overall target population of 40,000.

Although the east-west rail line escaped Beeching cuts, it was significantly reduced in 1967 so the the only section open for passenger transport was between Bletchley and Bedford. In the latter part of the 20th century, Bletchley Park too had fallen into obscurity being used as a BT training centre - its war time role still cloaked in secrecy.

3.7 Milton Keynes New Town

In 1963 the Bucks County Council had proposed a new city of 250,000 population should be developed between Bletchley and Stoney Stratford. The following year the South East Study 1961-1981 was published by the Ministry for Housing and Local Government and included a proposal for a new town with a projected population of 75,000 by 1981, stating 'and in the very long term a new city of a quarter of a million might arise'. In 1965, further assessment of the potential was included in the Northampton, Bedford and North Buckinghamshire Study, which concluded that a city of 250,000 'near Bletchley' was feasible.

Early in 1967, the Minister made an order under the New Towns Act 1965 designating the area now known as Milton Keynes as a New Town. The Milton Keynes Development Corporation (MKDC) was formed in 1967 and began preparing its master plan, with an interim report in 1968 with the Plan for Milton Keynes published in March 1970. An extract from the Plan is shown in Figure 19, and the grey line shows the extent of the completed West Bletchley at that time (the OS bases had not caught up with its rapid expansion!).

A special study of Bletchley was commissioned by Bletchley UDC and MKDC in March 1969 to assess how best to integrate the area of Bletchley into the new town and address some of the issues facing the area, including its transport linkages and the perceived issue of streets having pedestrian and cycle use, which had been planned out in the New Town Plan.

At the same time as the Plan for Milton Keynes was published an Interim Statement on the Existing Towns was also published. This presented a provisional plan for Bletchley with an emphasis on growth to 1979.

Figure 18: 1945 OS Map

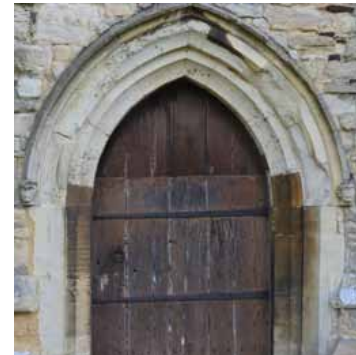
Figure 19: MKDC 1970 Master Plan

Figure 20 shows the first phase strategy for growth of the New Town, linking the existing towns through a north south development spine and led to redevelopment and enlargement of the shopping centre and new offices around the station, and early completion of the remaining housing areas to the north and east and the A421 to Buckingham (Standing Way grid road), which replaced the strategic role of Buckingham Road and the new A5 which led to the reduced role of Watling Street.

3.8   More Recent History

The early years of the 21st Century has bought some changes to West Bletchley. Bletchley Park has now become significant as an international visitor attraction, with innovative interpretation of its importance in determining the outcome of WWII. Major housing development has filled up parts of the former park too and the college redeveloped, and small sites have been infilled and redeveloped. The re-opening of the East-West rail route between Oxford and Cambridge is imminent, with further links proposed to Norwich and Reading. This will involve significant improvements to Bletchley Station and provide opportunities for other investment.

3.9   Conclusion

Whilst most of the obvious urban character of West Bletchley is associated with its rapid post-war expansion, the area retains some strong historic associations including the Roman routes through the area. evidence of medieval Bletchley and Edwardian and wartime Bletchley Park.

The early years of the 21st century are a time of reappraisal for West Bletchley. Two of the key influences that precipitated its expansion to national significance in the late 19th and first half of the 20th century again offer an opportunity to provide renewed impetus for change and regeneration. The re-opening of the East West Rail line will once again make Bletchley a centre of national communications and at the very heart of what the National Infrastructure Commission call 'the UK's Silicon Valley'.

And Bletchley Park, so important historically to the area, both before and during the war, is now making a contribution to Bletchley in the 21st century as one of the country's most significant visitor attractions, bringing people from throughout the world to the area.

Figure 20: MKDC First Phase Growth Strategy

Illustration of the range of building ages and styles in West Bletchley

1. 1930s housing
2. 1950s development
3. 1950s housing
4. Roman Road - now Buckingham Road.
5. 1915 housing
6. 1970s housing
7. 1960s housing
8. 19th century railway architecture
9. 1980s development
10. 12th Century St Mary's Church
11. 15th Century Rectory Cottages
12. Late 19th Century Bletchley Manor
13. Mid 20th Century Bletchley Park
14. 1960s Mellish Court Tower
15. 1960s housing
16. Early 21st Century housing

1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16