



Listening Learning Leading

**Beckley Conservation Area  
Character Study**  
18 December 1997

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The information contained in this character study was chiefly collected during June 1993 and is believed to be correct at the time of printing in July 1998. It should be appreciated that the legislative background may change and that the omission of any feature or features from the text and accompanying maps is not to be regarded as an indication that the feature or features are necessarily without significance or importance in conservation and planning terms. None of the statements contained in the document can be held as binding on the Council in the determination of applications for planning permission, listed building consent or conservation area consent.

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DATE OF PRINTING  
**JULY 1998**

## **INTRODUCTION**

**The 1990 Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act places a duty on every local planning authority to determine which parts of their area are areas of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance. The Act also states that the local planning authority should, from time to time, formulate and publish proposals for the preservation and enhancement of these conservation areas.**

**This document is an appraisal of the Beckley conservation area to give an overview of the established character to be preserved and to identify possible areas for future enhancement. It is intended to assist in defining what is of special architectural or historic importance, what should be protected and to give guidance as to the form, style and location of future change and development.**

The document is divided into various sections as follows:

### **1) The History of the Area**

This covers the period from prehistory to the present day. It includes significant architectural history, important dates and references to people and events that have helped to shape the area we see today.

### **2) The Established Character**

This is an assessment of the existing character, including the topography of the area, the vernacular style, predominant building materials and natural or man-made features of local interest.

### **3) Possible Areas for Enhancement**

These can range from major areas for environmental improvement, to very minor works of repair and redecoration.

### **4) Existing Conservation Policies**

This is an extract from the South Oxfordshire Local Plan identifying policies relating to listed buildings and conservation areas.

### **5) Plan of the Conservation Area**

This is a scale plan of the area which aims to identify the elements which contribute to the character. The plan includes the conservation area boundary, listed buildings (buildings identified by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport as being of special architectural or historic interest), former Grade III listed buildings (a now obsolete category but where the buildings may still be of architectural or historic interest) and other buildings of local note. This latter group consists of buildings that play a part in establishing the character of the street scene but have not yet been considered to be of sufficient importance to meet the current criteria for listing. Recent government guidance contained in PPG.15-**Planning and the Historic Environment** indicates, however, that

there is a presumption against the demolition of such buildings. Important trees are also identified. These are usually highly visible from public places and/or they contribute to the setting of a listed building. Important open spaces are identified as these are a vital element in the character of an area. Character is defined not just by buildings, walls and trees, but also by the spaces between them. These contribute to the setting of buildings. They allow views around the area and they are often an important element in the historical development of a settlement.

Important unlisted walls are identified. These are usually built of local materials and help to define spaces and frame views. Lastly, important views into, out of and around the conservation area are identified. It should be appreciated that a conservation area's character does not end with a line drawn on a map. Often the character is closely associated with attractive views out to surrounding countryside, sometimes via gaps between buildings. Views within an area such as that to a church or particularly attractive group of buildings are also important.

## **6) Archaeological Constraint Plan**

The character and history of an area are closely linked to its archaeological remains. This plan identifies the location of ancient monuments, earthworks and known cropmarks, find spots, archaeological sites and linear works. If nothing has yet been identified within an area then this map will be blank, but this does not mean that the area is necessarily archaeologically sterile.

## **BECKLEY**

### **1) The History of the Area**

There is some evidence for settlement in the Beckley area as early as the late Bronze Age (c.2000 BC), but the earliest clear sign of occupation comes from the site of a Romano-British villa which was discovered just east of the village in 1862. The Roman road from Dorchester to Bicester crosses the parish, its course coming closest to the present-day village in the form of a cutting down Sandy Path (Roman Way), past the Abingdon Arms and then off across Otmoor to Alchester, the site of a Roman town near Bicester.

This Roman presence may have encouraged Anglo-Saxon settlement in the area and the name of the village, which is of Saxon origin, means "Becca's wood or clearing". The long held belief however, that King Alfred had a palace here is based on a misreading of his will which in fact refers to "Becchanlea" in Sussex.

From the earliest days Beckley has lived by farming although it has never thrived. There were about 70 people in the village at the time of the Domesday survey in 1086 but still only 79 at the time of the 1377 poll tax. The village has never been as prosperous as its near neighbour of Horton (Bucks), which was built on good soil on the edge of Otmoor, whereas Beckley was established on top of the poorer ridge of calcareous grit and coral rag.

The Normans created the "honour" of Beckley and this passed through several hands to Guy St. Valery, who in 1112 was reported to be living in a "castellated" building, often referred to as the Palace of St. Valery. Although no trace of this now remains, the moat and earthworks could still be seen in the 19th century in the open field in the middle of the village to the north of the Abingdon Arms.

In 1227 Richard, Earl of Cornwall, son of King John, acquired the honour. Richard had already enclosed Beckley Park between 1192 and 1197 with a stone wall, fragmentary parts of which still remain to the east of the village. In 1229 he stocked the park with deer, which reputedly were often poached by Oxford scholars. Many English kings, including Henry III, Edward III, Henry IV and Edward IV are said to have hunted deer and wild boar in the park and a hunting lodge was built for their use. Thus were established the links with the crown, which must have had a profound effect on life in Beckley during the Middle Ages.

Traces of the original royal hunting lodge can still be seen in a field to the north of the village but this first building was destroyed not long after its completion. Some worked stones from the site have been found, however, in nearby cottages and walls, while the lodge itself was rebuilt further down the hill on the site of the present-day Lower Park Farm.

The most important house in the area is Beckley Park which was built c.1540 by Lord Williams of Thame. Lord Williams, as a favourite of Henry VIII, profited from the Dissolution of the Monasteries and the house and land remained the property of his descendants, the Earls of Abingdon until the estate was sold in 1924. The house escaped alteration in the 18th and 19th centuries and with its classic 'E' plan remains one of the best-preserved small Tudor houses in the country.

Along with growing crops such as wheat, rye, barley, peas and turnips, the surrounding forests and woodland were important to the village economy. Timber from Beckley Park was much used in the building industry and in 1457 twelve oaks were used in the construction of All Souls College, Oxford.

No inhabitant or perceptive visitor to Beckley can fail to be affected by the wide sweep of Otmoor to the north with its air of mystery and isolation. The moor has always played an important role in the life of the "seven towns" which surround it, including Beckley. The villagers enjoyed grazing rights over the moor until enclosure took place in the early 19th century which led to the famous Otmoor riots. The loss of grazing caused severe economic hardship for the villagers which was made worse by the national agricultural depression of the late 19th century. Today the moor is once more drained and, despite the continuing presence of a small-arms rifle range, is again mostly used for agriculture, although on several occasions there have been proposals to create a large reservoir.

Historically the comparative inaccessibility of Beckley meant that the village remained small and the unusual fact that the three ancient roads at three ends of the village (Church lane, Otmoor Lane and the track to Middle Path Farm) now lead only to open countryside has contributed to a lack of development in more recent years. Similarly, changing social patterns and the emergence of strong planning constraints have also helped to protect the historic form of the village. Today farming is still important but most of the residents now work in Oxford or commute to London or elsewhere. The settlement was first designated as a conservation area on 11 December 1984 and the boundaries of the area extended on 18 December 1997.

## 2) The Established Character

Beckley is a linear hilltop village, its ancient route-ways straddling a 300-400 foot ridge overlooking the 4,500 acres of the original Otmoor. The location of St. Mary's Church at the western end suggests that this part of the village was settled first and then spread eastwards along the ridge. Although the village has no 'centre', the junction of High Street and Church Street by the church is certainly a focal point in the broadly U-shaped plan, formed by Church Street, High Street and Otmoor Lane which circle the higher ground and largely define the extent of the historic settlement. It is likely that dense woodland once provided shelter from the prevailing south-westerly winds and that the many freshwater springs and the commanding view over Otmoor outweighed the disadvantages of a northerly aspect in the establishment of the settlement here.

Many of the older houses and walls in the village are built of the local limestone, coral rag, obtained from quarries which are now closed, although the medieval palace was also a source of stone for some dwellings. The majority of cottages were probably thatched and several thatch roofs still survive. However, many were replaced in the 18th and 19th centuries with locally made clay peg-tiles. Some old roofs have also been replaced with slate or machine-made tiles. There are some properties built of buff stock brick and rendered walls can also be found. There is a variety of roof forms but many cottages have steeply pitched roofs, often with dormers and simple, unfussy details to verges and eaves.

There are few buildings in Beckley of outstanding architectural merit although the parish church of St. Mary is essentially a 14th century structure with later alterations and contains important early stained glass and wall paintings. Beckley Park and Woodperry House lie outside the village but are both very important buildings. Within the village Cripp's Cottage in Otmoor Lane and Alflyn in Church Street are perhaps the oldest secular buildings and date from the 16th century. The 18th century Grove House and the 19th century primary school are substantial buildings but, while many houses are listed none is of truly outstanding architectural merit. It is important to appreciate that it is the village as a whole which makes the strongest architectural impact. The reasons for this are subtle but of great importance from a planning and conservation point of view.

Geographers, archaeologists and historians have identified two main village forms; the so-called 'squared' or village-green type and the 'roadside' or linear village. Beckley is a roadside village, but unlike the majority of roadside villages, which are often just a string of houses pushed aside by a busy road which runs through them, in Beckley the houses manage to 'contain' the road. Two elements intensify this impression. One is the absence of through traffic so that people commonly stroll along the carriageway; the other is the enclosing effect of the high banks and stone walls which run through a surprisingly large part of the village. They 'compress' the road space in a visually satisfying way, creating in the process a real sense of place for Beckley. This effect is enhanced by high, close-clipped shrubs and hedges. There are many grass verges and banks which come directly to the road edge and these soften the harshness. The short stretch of granite setts which forms the kerb along one side of Church Lane and High Road also enhances the streetscene. One has the unusual sensation in Beckley that the road is as much for pedestrians as for motor vehicles.

The attraction of Beckley lies as much in its topographical setting and landscape as in its buildings. There are groups of forest trees on the higher slopes on each side of the village but few really large trees, probably due

to the greater exposure and thinner soils. There are important groups of trees around Grove House and at the eastern end of the village leading to Upper Park Farm, while, the gardens behind the Abingdon Arms public house are particularly attractive. The extension to the conservation area includes the woodland 'nursery' to the south of the village along New Inn Road.

A large scale map of the conservation area identifying the location of traditional street furniture worthy of retention and attractive road surfaces and paving materials has been produced and is available for inspection at the District Council Offices by appointment.

An essential feature of the village is the outstanding view with its vast skyline out across Otmoor which can be gained from several vantage points, including above Grove House, at the end of Church Lane, from the site of Beckley Palace and from Roman Way. The undeveloped nature of the Beckley Palace site is an essential element in retaining this view.

Pressure to live, and therefore to build, in Beckley is intense, due to its attractive character, especially in the area defined by the conservation area. Ironically this threatens the very elements in the village which make it so desirable, namely its modest scale, its solitude and the predominance of traditional building styles and materials. Where development, extension or alteration is acceptable, careful attention needs to be paid to important details such as the use of correct mortar mixes and pointing details for brick and stonework and the choice of the best quality materials.

There has been some modern infill construction within the conservation area, but the majority of post-war development has been higher up on the Woodperry Road in the form of ribbon development which, unfortunately has little in common with the historic form of the village or local building traditions. Development is looser and less enclosed in the extension of the conservation area along Otmoor Lane. Here there has been some rather unfortunate infilling of gaps with modern development, but the area still retains its own distinctive character, its loose-knit nature forming a marked but attractive contrast with the denser settlement found along High Street and, to a lesser extent, Church Street.



### 3) Possible Areas for Enhancement

Beckley is an attractive village that is obviously well maintained and cared for by its residents. As a result there are few areas where there is a need for large scale schemes of environmental improvement. However, the opportunity does exist to carry out small scale works which could improve the streetscene for residents and visitors alike.

The most important and dramatic improvement would be the laying underground of the existing overhead cables and wires by the statutory undertakers. These wires are particularly prominent in Church Street where they interrupt several attractive views. The work would, however, have to be carried out in a manner that does not destroy or damage other important amenities such as grass verges and banks or granite kerbs.

Street furniture plays a vital role in the character and appearance of an area and the quality of items such as road direction signs, street name-plates, notice boards, litter bins and seats could all be improved. This includes the method of fixing of several of these items to poles, posts and walls, which is often crude and unattractive. A coordinated scheme for the design, painting, fixing and siting of street furniture could also be considered.

A large scale map of traditional street furniture and attractive road surfaces and paving materials has been produced (*see Section 2 'The Established Character'*).

The management of the natural environment in collaboration with landowners is an important way of maintaining and enhancing the character of an area. Consideration should be given to the encouragement of tree management and planting in order to check, and if necessary, fell overgrown, intrusive and unwanted trees and to plant new ones where appropriate. Important vistas must be maintained and thought given to creating new ones. In the past twenty five years the disappearance of many large elms and the haphazard growth of other species have emphasised how quickly and completely the landscape changes. In the past, the willows in the fields below Church Street were regularly pollarded, thus keeping open attractive views out towards Otmoor, but these are now blocked. A tree management scheme needs to be discussed with landowners in order to restore this important part of the character of the village.

There is a potential area for enhancement around the pond and spring by Chapel Cottage. This feature is rather overgrown and may not even be noticed by casual passers-by. There is a danger in over restoring such a feature, however, as it is not the location for an ornamental landscaped village pond, but it would benefit from more regular maintenance such as the removal of weeds and possibly more landscaped planting. A strategically placed wooden seat would enable people to rest and appreciate the pond and its attractive setting.

The use of traditional materials and detailing can have considerable effect in enhancing an area's character. The great majority of buildings in the village are privately owned and therefore the owners of prominent and historic properties are encouraged to assist in improving the streetscene by removing unsympathetic modern materials such as concrete tiles, u.P.V.C. windows and plastic rainwater goods, and reinstating traditional materials such as clay tiles, softwood windows and cast iron guttering. The owners of thatched buildings are

also encouraged to retain or reinstate plain, flush ridges, which are part of the traditional thatching style of South Oxfordshire. This has recently been carried out at several cottages including 2 and 3 Church Street and Cripps Cottage in Otmoor Lane where the simple flush ridge detail is once more an essential part of the attractive streetscene.

Small amounts of financial assistance may be available in some instances from the Council for the repair and renovation of historic buildings within the conservation area and the reinstatement of lost original details and materials. Grants may also be available for appropriate schemes of environmental improvement.

#### **4) South Oxfordshire Local Plan adopted by Council, April 1997**

##### **LISTED BUILDINGS**

###### **POLICY CON 1**

Proposals for the demolition of any building included on the list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest will not be permitted except in most exceptional circumstances.

###### **POLICY CON 2**

The council will make full use of its powers to serve repairs notices to prevent the wilful neglect of listed buildings.

##### **ALTERATIONS TO LISTED BUILDINGS**

###### **POLICY CON 3**

The use of modern materials such as aluminium and upvc will not normally be permitted for the doors or windows of listed buildings. Sealed double-glazed timber windows will not normally be permitted unless their mouldings precisely match those of traditional windows. The use of secondary glazing will normally be acceptable.

###### **POLICY CON 4**

Listed building consent will not normally be granted for proposals which involve the use of cement-rich mortars, abrasive cleaning methods and chemically-based sealants, nor for the painting of unpainted brickwork and stone or the use of unsuitable colour schemes on listed buildings.

###### **POLICY CON 5**

The alteration or removal of historic internal features in buildings included on the statutory list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest will only be permitted in exceptional circumstances.

##### **CHANGES OF USE AND EXTENSIONS TO LISTED BUILDINGS**

###### **POLICY CON 6**

Any change of use of a listed building must be appropriate to its character, and any extension must be sympathetic to the original structure in design, scale and materials and must not dominate or overwhelm it.

##### **THE SETTING OF LISTED BUILDINGS**

###### **POLICY CON 7**

Proposals for development which would adversely affect the setting of a listed building will normally be refused.

##### **CONSERVATION AREAS**

###### **POLICY CON 8**

The council will use all its powers under the relevant acts to ensure that the character of individual conservation areas is preserved or enhanced.

###### **POLICY CON 9**

Consent to demolish a building in a conservation area will normally only be granted if the loss of the building would not adversely affect the character of the area, and if there are detailed and acceptable plans for the redevelopment of the site.

## **POLICY CON 10**

When considering proposals for development in conservation areas, the council will require:-

- (i) the design and scale of new work to be in sympathy with the established character of the area;
- (ii) the use of traditional materials, whenever this is appropriate to the character of the area;
- (iii) the retention of existing walls, hedges, or any other features which contribute to the character of the area.

## **THATCHING STYLE**

### **POLICY CON 11**

In order to protect the traditional thatching style of South Oxfordshire the District Council will generally promote the use of long straw and resist the introduction of patterned block-cut ridges on thatched buildings.

## **ADVERTISEMENTS IN CONSERVATION AREAS AND ON LISTED BUILDINGS**

### **POLICY CON 12**

The council will not normally permit the display of signs on a listed building or in a conservation area which are in any way harmful to the character and appearance of the building or area. Where it is accepted that a sign is needed, its design and materials should reflect the best traditional practice.

### **POLICY CON 13**

The installation of blinds or canopies of untraditional form or materials on buildings within conservation areas will not normally be permitted.

## **BURGAGE PLOTS**

### **POLICY CON 14**

In the historic towns of Henley, Thame and Wallingford the burgage plots to the rear of the principal streets will generally be protected from amalgamation and from development which would diminish their historic interest and value.

## **PRESERVATION AND ENHANCEMENT OF CONSERVATION AREAS**

### **POLICY CON 15**

In conservation areas, the council will take all available steps to ensure:

- (i) that the introduction or intensification of uses which conflict with the special character of the area is resisted;
- (ii) that existing walls, buildings, trees, hedges, open spaces and important views are retained, where they contribute to the character of the area;
- (iii) that whenever the opportunity arises, unsightly overhead wires and unnecessary signs are removed. The statutory undertakers will be urged to site their services underground;
- (iv) that where necessary, improvements are made to the visual quality of the floorspace, street furniture, lighting and signs; and
- (v) that development outside a conservation area would not have a detrimental effect on the conservation area.

## **ARCHAEOLOGY**

### **POLICY CON 16**

The council will not normally permit development which would adversely affect the sites or settings of nationally-important archaeological remains, whether scheduled or not, or those of monuments of special local importance.

#### **POLICY CON 17**

Before the determination of an application for development which may affect a site of archaeological interest or potentially of archaeological importance, prospective developers will be required, where necessary, to make provision for an archaeological field evaluation, in order to enable an informed and reasoned planning decision to be made.

#### **POLICY CON 18**

Wherever practicable and desirable, developments affecting sites of archaeological interest should be designed to achieve physical preservation in situ of archaeological deposits. Where this is not practicable or desirable, the district planning authority will impose conditions on planning permissions, or seek legal obligations, which will require the developer to provide an appropriate programme of archaeological investigation, recording and publication by a professionally qualified body acceptable to the district planning authority.

#### **PARKS AND GARDENS OF SPECIAL HISTORIC INTEREST**

##### **POLICY CON 19**

Proposals which would damage the character, setting or amenities of a park or garden of special historic interest, especially those contained in the English Heritage Register, will not normally be permitted.

#### **COMMON LAND**

##### **POLICY CON 20**

Proposals for development on or affecting common land, village greens and other important spaces within settlements will not normally be permitted.



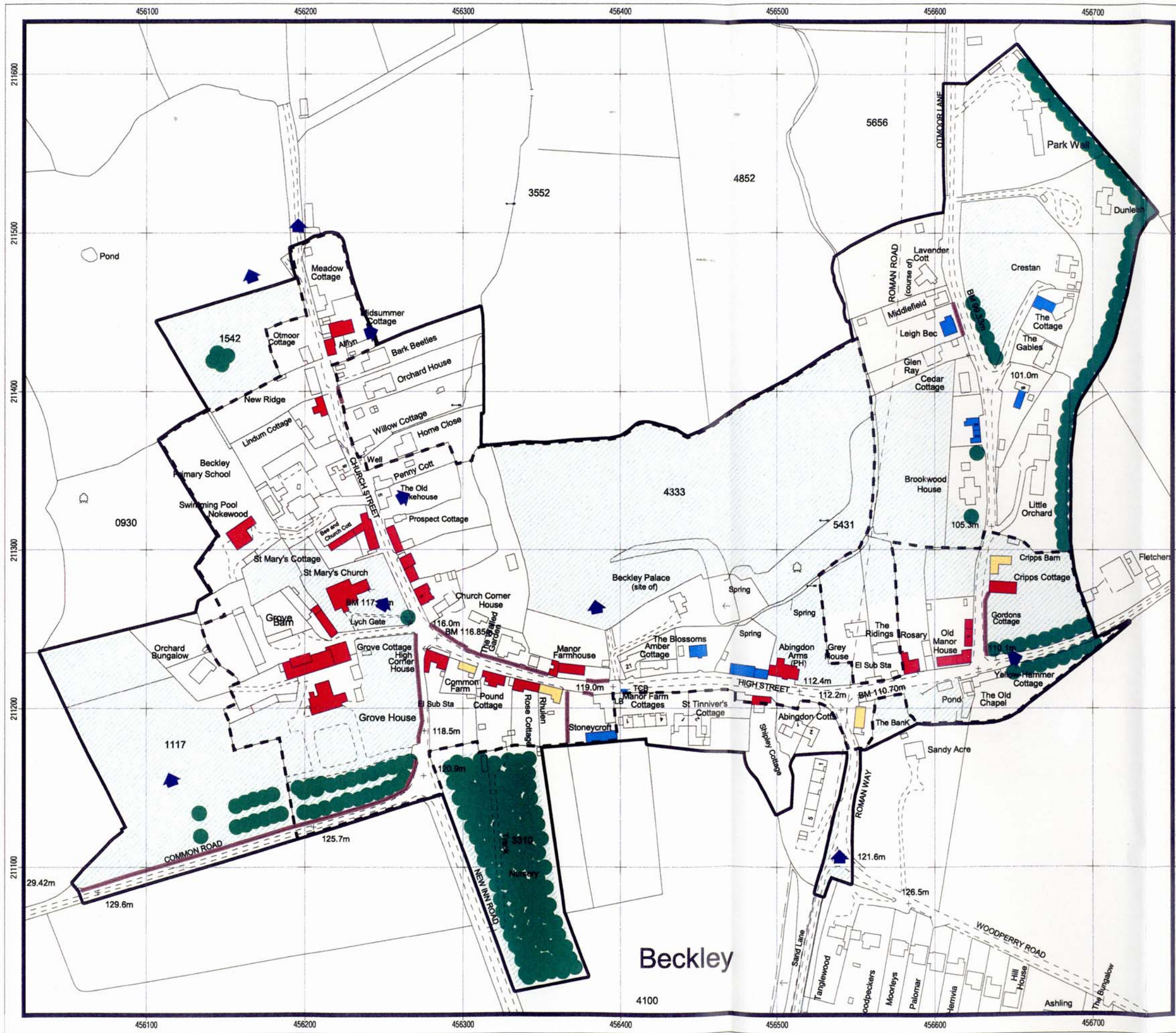
South Oxfordshire District Council



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- Conservation boundary (as of 18 December 1997)
- - - Conservation boundary (as of 11 December 1984)
- ▲ Important views in, out and around
- Listed building
- Former Grade III Listed Building
- Building of local note
- Important wall
- Important trees
- Important open space

With the exception of views, only those features in the key that are located within the boundaries of the conservation area are defined on the plan.



5) Plan of the Conservation Area  
**BECKLEY**



South Oxfordshire District Council



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- Sites, Find spots, Linear works
- Earthworks, cropmarks
- Scheduled ancient monument

Only those areas of known archaeological constraint that are located within the boundaries of the conservation area are identified on the plan.

6) Archaeological Constraint Plan  
**BECKLEY**



Beckley

4100

## **PUBLISHED CONSERVATION AREA CHARACTER STUDIES**

**(with date of adoption as Supplementary Planning Guidance by South Oxfordshire District Council in brackets).**

1. Watlington (8 April 1997)
2. Greys Green (8 April 1997)
3. Forest Hill (25 November 1997)
4. Beckley (18 December 1997)
5. North Moreton (18 December 1997)
6. Warborough (18 December 1997)
7. Mapledurham (19 January 1999)
8. Benson (23 March 1999)
9. Waterstock (21 October 1999)
10. Britwell Salome (12 September 2000)
11. Brightwell Baldwin (12 September 2000)
12. Chalgrove (12 September 2000)
13. Stoke Row (12 September 2000)
14. East Hagbourne (14 November 2000)

Others in preparation include Stanton St John and Thame.

After the initial fieldwork and documentary research, each character study has been through a process of extensive public consultation (including a public meeting before it has formally been adopted by the Council as Supplementary Planning Guidance in accordance with Policy CON 15 of the South Oxfordshire Local Plan.