

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 Benson 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. Finally, 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.

BENSON

1) The History of the Area

Benson is an ancient community and there is evidence of man's influence in the area from prehistoric times. Benson was probably favoured for settlement because of its position near a ford across the Thames, its supply of fresh water from Ewelme Brook and the ground deposits which lifted it up above the flood plain and surrounding marshes.

A few worked flints from the Neolithic period have been found in the area, as have traces of a 'cursus', a long linear earthwork consisting of banks and ditches, on Benson airfield. Late Iron Age pottery and a bronze coin have been recovered from Mill Lane. In the Roman period a settlement probably existed to the south of the present day village on a track that linked the important nearby town of Dorchester with the ancient Icknield Way. This settlement seems to have been concentrated to the south of St Helen's Church, but the earthworks were destroyed without record when gravel pits were excavated and a new road was constructed early this century.

Benson became strategically important in the Anglo-Saxon period when it was on the frontier between the kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia. The first reference to a settled community here is in 571 when it is recorded as 'Baenesington' in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. The name means 'the settlement of Benesa's people'. It is likely that Benson was the most important settlement on this part of the Thames, more so than either Wallingford or Oxford at this time.

It is again mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entry for 779 when Offa of Mercia defeated Cynewulf, the king of Wessex, at the battle of Bensington and took it over. Tradition has it that Offa rebuilt St Helen's Church in stone although no trace of the Saxon church remains today. Roman and pre-Roman earthworks to the south and east of the village were identified by 18th century antiquaries as 'Offa's Castle' although it is unlikely that such a structure ever existed. However, the name still survives today in The Castle Inn, Castle Square and Castle Close. In the later Anglo-Saxon period the village began to decline in importance and was overshadowed by Wallingford and Oxford.

Benson remained a royal manor after the Norman invasion of 1066. It was the administrative centre of an area extending as far south as Henley and included much valuable land. This land constantly passed between royal favourites, upon whose death the land reverted to the crown, and therefore a castle or manor house was never constructed. In 1627, Charles I finally sold the land to city financiers and until 1935, when the lordship of the manor finally lapsed, it was associated with the Knollys, Paul and Stapleton families of Greys Court, near Henley.

The Anglo-Saxon church of St Helen's was the mother church of Henley, Nettlebed and Warborough, which is further indication of Benson's importance in the pre-Conquest period. However, around 1141, the Empress Matilda donated the church and its dependencies to the newly founded Dorchester Abbey. The church continued to be associated with the abbey until Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries in the 16th century.

Life in Benson appears to have been quiet and uneventful for many centuries. The majority of the residents were farmers who grew wheat and barley and kept sheep. Others ground corn in the river mills or were involved in barge traffic. A brief flurry of activity came in 1642 when Charles I stopped in Benson on his

way to try to retake London from the Parliamentarians. He set up court in what was the Red Lion Inn, on the corner of Mill Lane and the High Street, and issued a proclamation to the Mayor of Reading that Caversham bridge be rebuilt to allow passage of his troops.

Benson emerged from its long dormancy during the period of coach travel in the 18th century when the village was a convenient stop on the road from London to Oxford and beyond, via Henley. The large posting inns of the White Hart, The Castle and The Crown were built at this time. Turnpiking of the road increased the volume of traffic and in 1843 it was estimated that fifty coaches passed through Benson every day and there was stabling in the village for 200 horses. There were also at least twelve inns and ale houses in the village at this time.

The hey-day of coach travel through Benson finished when the Great Western Railway came to Moulsoford in 1840 and to Wallingford in 1866. The coaching inns declined and villagers reverted to agriculture. The fertile agricultural land around Benson was enclosed in 1863 and farming remained the principal activity for many more decades to come.

The 20th century has seen expansion of the village, particularly to the north and south. All vehicular traffic passed through the village until the airfield was constructed, effectively cutting off the Old London Road. A new by-pass was built in 1931 (St Helen's Avenue) and this in turn was by-passed by the A4074 when the airfield was extended in 1941. The airfield was strategically important during the Second World War as the home of an Operational Training Unit, and later for the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit. The airfield remained with the RAF after the war and later became famous as the home of the Queen's Flight.

Benson today is a relatively quiet village with a strong sense of local community and identity. Agriculture is still important but the majority of local people are either associated with RAF Benson or commute to Oxford, London or Reading. Facilities have been provided in the form of shops, a library, village hall and surgery and these have helped to keep Benson alive as a thriving community. The historic centre of the village and Littleworth were designated as a conservation area on 1 March 1995.

2) The Established Character

Benson is an attractive village with an intensively developed historic core and modern development to the north, north-east and south. Most of the modern development is outside the conservation area boundary. The River Thames forms an effective buffer to development to the west and similarly RAF Benson airfield has prevented further expansion to the east.

The historic core of Benson is basically linear in form, extending from St Helen's Church in the west to Crown Square and Brook Street in the east. The form of the medieval village is a reflection of the importance and complexity of the earlier Romano-British and Saxon settlements. Archaeological evidence suggests that these were located to the south and east of the present day village and the High Street may follow a linear route which linked the two settlements. The core area incorporates an attractive mix of cottages, houses, imposing former coaching inns and public houses. The High Street has an intensively built up street frontage with few gaps between buildings, but either end of the High Street opens up into a larger open space, Castle Square to the west and Crown Square to the east. There is no single focal point in the historic core although Castle Square is the largest open space and is a meeting point of several roads. This reflects the fact that coaching routes converged at this point from Oxford, Aylesbury and London .

The topography of the village is generally flat although there is a slight fall in the land towards the River Thames. The river does not play a significant role in the character of Benson due to the location of the earlier settlements on dry gravel deposits above the level of the flood plain. The fresh water provided by Ewelme Brook was a major factor in the settlement of the area. The brook plays an important role in the character of Benson when approaching from the east and it is a significant feature in Brook Street at the western end of the conservation area. It then skirts the village to the south, mostly through an area of modern houses. Development is less intense to the north-east of the conservation area where open fields lie immediately adjacent to Littleworth Road.

The conservation area boundary has been drawn to include Littleworth which is an attractive 'outlier' of Benson with its own distinct character. Many of the buildings here are of local historic interest, dating from the 18th and 19th centuries. Most are small cottages but some to the west are larger houses with spacious gardens. The small cottages to the east front onto a narrow footpath which separates them from allotment gardens. Littleworth Road runs to the rear and forms part of the boundary of the conservation area.

There are many historic buildings in Benson, particularly along the High Street between Castle Square and Brook Street. Some date, in part, from the 16th century and several from the 17th century. Some of these earlier buildings have been concealed behind refronting carried out in the 18th and 19th centuries. Benson was particularly prosperous at this time and this is reflected in the number of new buildings and buildings refronted in this period. These include The Castle, The Crown, the Red Lion and the White Hart coaching inns which were all refronted in the 18th and 19th centuries. There are Victorian houses and cottages throughout the conservation area but particularly good examples are found at the western end of Littleworth on the fringes of the old village. Some modern development has taken place within the conservation area, but this is largely confined to a few houses and the shopping precinct in the middle of the High Street.

There are many different building styles, sizes and heights within the historic core, but the majority of the houses present a simple and dignified facade to the street. Some of the larger buildings, particularly those of

the 18th and early 19th centuries, have symmetrical street elevations. A number have elements of decoration in the form of string courses, cornices, dentilled brickwork under the eaves and pediments. Windows are a mixture of side-hung wooden casements and painted wooden sashes divided into four, eight or twelve panes. Many houses have four or six panelled doors, sometimes with a simple canopy above. Some of the larger properties also have a fanlight.

Historic buildings of particular note include St Helen's Church, the present structure of which dates, in part, to the 12th century. The base of the attractive tower was built around 1765 in a classical style but it was finished in 1781 in the Gothic style, a reflection of the changing tastes in Georgian architecture. 16 Brook Street and 2 Chapel Lane date in part to the 16th century. Many buildings belong to the 17th century and the most impressive include the former Castle Inn public house and 2 to 6 High Street, formerly the Red Lion Inn where Charles I is reputed to have held court in 1642. 18th century buildings of note include the former White Hart Hotel, Castle Square, 11 to 15 High Street and The Crown public house, High Street. The most impressive building of the 19th century is probably The Old Vicarage, Church Road, which was designed around 1870 by Charles Buckeridge, who also rebuilt the chancel of St Helen's Church.

Many building materials are used in the village. There are a few timber framed buildings, but the majority are of brick, brick and flint and limestone rubble. Several buildings are rendered, sometimes over brickwork, but often in an attempt to protect walls of limestone rubble. This rubble is very chalky and porous in character and particularly prone to erosion. In the past it has also been protected by coats of limewash. Red brick (tending to orange rather than purple) is widespread but flared headers are also used to create a decorative pattern across the whole facade. Detailing to windows, doors and quoins is usually picked out in red, sometimes in high quality rubbed bricks. Roofs are usually steeply pitched and covered in handmade red clay tiles. Some later buildings have a slate roof and there are a few examples of thatched roofs. Garden walls are mostly constructed of brick, brick and flint, or brick and limestone rubble.

Road surface materials are an important element in the character of the village. There are granite setts in Oxford Road, the corner of Castle Close, Chapel Lane, Mill Stream, Crown Lane, Observatory Close and Aldridge Close while their recent removal by the County Council along Church Road is a sad loss to this part of the village. Granite kerbing and setts exist on the corner of Brook Street and Crown Square. Good quality modern brick paviors have been used in the recent environmental improvement works in the High Street, which were carried out by the Parish Council in conjunction with the District Council.

There are many important mature and semi-mature trees which contribute to the character of the village and to the setting of its historic buildings. The most significant groups are found around St Helen's Church, 16 Brook Street and 8 Brook Street. Large mature trees play a vital role in the setting of the attractive group of buildings, including the former White Hart Hotel, at the junction of Oxford Road, Castle Square and Church Road. There are also important trees at the western end of Littleworth.

Although Benson has an intensively developed historic core, there are still areas of important open space within the conservation area which contribute to the character. These include the churchyard of St Helen's Church and the school playing field and allotments in Littleworth.

There are a few locations where attractive views into, out of and around the conservation area can be obtained.

These are composed of an attractive mix of vernacular building materials, historic buildings and trees. There is often surprisingly little inappropriate modern development to spoil these views. Those around Castle Square are particularly attractive and the tower of St Helen's Church is a prominent feature to the west of the village. Views can also be gained out of the conservation area looking north across the open fields from Littleworth Road.

Several stretches of wall contribute to Benson's character, particularly the brick and flint walls around St Helen's Church, the brick and stone walls around the former White Hart Hotel and the brick walls between The Old Vicarage and 5 Oxford Road.

There are many buildings of local interest in Benson which have not yet been judged to be of special architectural or historic interest, but which nevertheless still contribute a great deal to the attractive quality of the street scene. These include several buildings in the Littleworth area, the Victorian part of Benson Primary School in Oxford Road, the Free Church in the High Street and the former Farmers Man public house in Brook Street.

3) Possible Areas for Enhancement

Benson is an attractive village and it is evident that care and attention are paid to maintaining the existing character and enhancing it in some locations. However, there are a number of opportunities that still exist for further enhancement.

There are many overhead wires and cables in certain streets which disrupt views and are generally ugly and intrusive. These are particularly prominent in Oxford Road, Church Road, High Street, Brook Street, Mill Lane and Littleworth. The wires and cables should be laid underground by the statutory undertakers when the opportunity arises.

There are areas in Benson where attractive paving materials, such as granite setts and kerbing survive and the opportunity should be taken to preserve and extend the use of such materials. Unfortunately, ugly concrete kerbing has recently been used in several locations, including Church Road, Oxford Road, Castle Square, High Street and Brook Street and this should be improved upon. The tarmac surface of the lanes in Littleworth could ideally be replaced with a more attractive material, such as blue brick paviors. Similarly, the large and prominent tarmac car park to The Sun public house could be improved by the use of better quality materials and possibly some sensitive landscaping and planting. The verges around Crown Square require improvement and consideration should be given to providing a pedestrian footpath.

The forecourts to Kingsford House in the High Street and The Castle Inn in Castle Square are a prominent and important part of the setting of these attractive listed buildings. Both forecourts are in need of maintenance and renovation using suitable traditional materials. The wide tarmac pavement in the High Street, opposite the modern shopping precinct could also be improved with better quality materials.

The bollards at the western end of the High Street need regular repainting. The rather ugly safety railings at the corner of Castle Close and the High Street could be painted black to reduce their undue prominence. The railings over the brook at the entrance to Observatory Close could also be painted black or another dark colour.

The Q8 garage site at the western end of the High Street is not particularly attractive owing to the profusion of signs and associated features. It is, moreover, very prominent in the streetscene. Consideration should be given to improving its appearance or even to relocating the garage and workshops to a less sensitive location. Similar consideration should be given to relocating the Passey and Sons scrapyards in Brook Street, although it should also be recognised that both this business and the Q8 garage play an important role in the local community.

Shopfronts play a vital role in an historic streetscape and even one which is ugly and discordant can have a very detrimental effect, not only on the building in which it is fitted but on the surrounding area. The opportunity should be taken to retain and repair traditional shopfronts and to reintroduce traditional designs into historic buildings. Calnan Brothers Butchers at 42 High Street and Benson Country Pine at 23 Castle Square are examples of good quality traditional shopfronts. Gateway supermarket in the High Street is located just outside the conservation area but is nevertheless very prominent in the historic streetscene. The rather ugly modern design could be improved by the use of better quality materials and a

reduction in the amount of plate glass. Further advice on shopfront design can be found in the District Council's Traditional Shopfront Design Guide.

The use of traditional materials and detailing can have considerable effect in enhancing a conservation area's character. The owners of historic and prominent properties are encouraged to remove unsympathetic modern materials such as concrete tiles, UPVC windows and plastic rainwater goods and to reinstate traditional materials such as clay tiles, painted softwood windows and cast iron guttering. The owners of the few thatched buildings are also encouraged to retain or reinstate plain, flush ridges, which are part of the traditional thatching style of South Oxfordshire.

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.